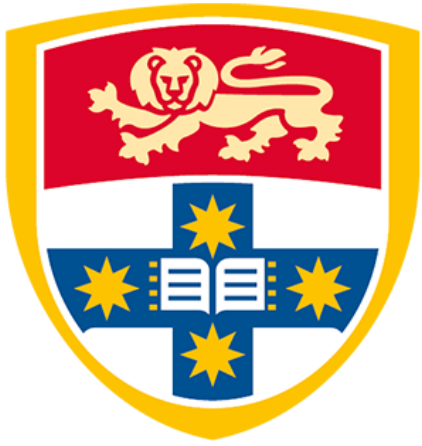
Women and Labour Organizing in Asia

Diversity, autonomy and activism

Edited by
Kaye Broadbent and Michele Ford

ASAA Women in Asia Series



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Women and Labour Organizing in Asia

This book investigates women's labour activism in Asia. Although focusing primarily on women, the contributions to this book address issues that affect all workers. Chapters on China, India, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Bangladesh examine the role women's activism has played inside, and outside, formal union movements. Whilst documenting the particular factors characterizing individual national contexts, this book emphasizes the similarities in women's experiences of unions and other forms of labour activism and the barriers women labour activists have faced. It considers the relationships between women union members and activists and male officials and union members, links with other social movements – particularly the broader women's movement – and the details of specific labour campaigns and struggles. In doing so, it details the role of women in union activism in Asia, covering all the major economies of the region, and successfully challenges the prevailing conception of Asian women workers as passive and uninterested in industrial issues.

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Series editor's Foreword

The contributions of women to the social, political and economic transformations occurring in the Asian region are legion. Women have served as leaders of nations, communities, workplaces, activist groups and families. Asian women have joined with others to participate in fomenting change at micro and macro levels. They have been both agents and targets of national and international interventions in social policy. In the performance of these myriad roles women have forged new and modern gendered identities that are recognisably global and local. Their experiences are rich, diverse and instructive. The bookws in this series testify to the central role women play in creating the new Asia and re-creating Asian womanhood. Moreover, these books reveal the resilience and inventiveness of women around the Asian region in the face of entrenched evolving patriarchal social norms.

Scholars publishing in this series demonstrate a commitment to promoting the productive conversation between Women's Studies and Asian Studies. The need to understand the diversity of experiences of femininity and womanhood around the world increases inexorably as globalization proceeds apace. Lessons from the experiences of Asian women present us with fresh opportunities for building new possibilities for women's progress the world over.

The Asian Studies Association of Austrialia (ASAA) sponsors this publication series as part of its on-going commitment to promoting knowledge about women in Asia. In particular, the ASAA women's caucus provides the intellectual vigour and enthusiasm that maintains the Women in Asia Series (WIAS). The aim of the series, since it inception in 1992, is to promote knowledge about women in Asia to both the academic and general audiences. To this end, WIAS books draw on a wide range of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, political science, cultural studies and history. The Series could not function without the generous professional advice provided by many anonymous readers. Moreover, the wise counsel provided by Peter Sowden at Routledge is invaluable. WIAS, its authors and the ASAA are very grateful to these people for their expert work.

Louise Edwards (University of Technology Sydney)
Series Editor

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Kaye Broadbent

Kaye and I edited this book at a time when I was working on another very different collection – also for the ASAA's Women in Asia series – on women and work in Indonesia. Although it was challenging keeping both volumes on track, this happy coincidence provided me with a great opportunity to think about the nature of women's work in a single Asian country and women's labour activism in Asia as a whole at the same time. My thanks to Kaye, my collaborator on this volume; to all our authors, for the effort they have put into their chapters; to my colleagues at Sydney, for providing such a convivial working environment; and most of all to my partner Muliawarman for putting up with the fact that I regularly over-commit myself by taking on these kinds of projects. Thanks also to the series editor Louise Edwards for her unfailing support throughout the process and to Rachael Chadwick for helping with the final read-through.

Michele Ford

Abbreviations

ACFTU	All China Federation of Trade Unions
ACILS	American Centre for International Labor Solidarity
ACWF	All China Women's Federation
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations
AWAM	All Women's Action Society (Malaysia)
BBW	*Barisan Buruh Wanita* (The Women's Labour Front, Indonesia)
BIGUF	Bangladesh Independent Garment workers Union Federation
CAW	Committee of Asian Women
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
COE	collectively owned enterprises (China)
CUEPACS	Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services Sector (Malaysia)
CWWN	Chinese Women Workers Network
EKP	*Eksath Kantha Peramun* (The United Women's Front)
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FKTU	Federation of Korean Trade Unions
FSPMI	*Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia* (Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Union)
GMOA	Government Medical Officers Association (Sri Lanka)
GNOA	Government Nursing Officers Association (Sri Lanka)
GSBI	*Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia* (Indonesian Labour Unions Association)
GUF	Global Union Federation
HMC	Hyundai Motor Company (Korea)
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITGLWF	International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation
JAG-VAW	Joint Action Group against Violence Against Women (Malaysia)
JHU	*Jathika Hela Urumaya* (National Sinhala Heritage Party, Sri Lanka)

JVP	*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (ethno-nationalist Marxist party, Sri Lanka)
KCTU	Korean Congress of Trade Unions
KSBSI	*Konfederasi Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia* (Confederation of Indonesian Prosperous Trade Unions)
KSPI	*Kongres Serikat Pekerja Indonesia* (Indonesian Trade Union Congress)
KSPSI	*Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia* (Confederation of All Indonesia Workers' Unions)
KWTU	Korean Womens Trade Union
KWWAU	Korean Women Workers Associations United
LRA	Labour Relations Act (Thailand)
LSSP	*Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (Sri Lanka)
LWRA	*Lembaga Wanita, Remaja dan Anak* (Women, Teenagers and Children's Institute, Indonesia)
MFA	Multi-Fibre Agreement
MKMA	Malaysian Knitting Manufacturers Association
MSV	*Maubima Surekeeme Vyaparaya* (Sri Lanka, Movement for the Protection of Motherland)
MTMA	Malaysian Textile Manufacturers Association
MTUC	Malaysian Trade Union Congress
NEP	New Economic Policy (Malaysia)
PBI	*Partai Buruh Indonesia* (Indonesia Labour Party)
PGRI	*Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia* (Indonesian Teachers Union)
PHNA	Public Health Nurses Association (Sri Lanka)
PSI	Public Service International
PSUNU	Public Services United Nurses Union (Sri Lanka)
PSWS	*Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor* (Friends of Women, Selangor)
SBR	*Serikat Buruh Regional* (Regional Trade Union, Indonesia)
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLNA	Sri Lanka Nurses Association
SOE	state owned enterprises
SPEE	*Serikat Pekerja Elektronik Elektrik* (Electrical and Electronic Workers Union, Indonesia)
SPN	*Serikat Pekerja Nasional* (National Workers Union, Indonesia)
SPSI	*Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia* (All Indonesia Workers Union)
SWTU	Seoul Womens Trade Union
TCF	Textiles, clothing and footwear
TFTCLW	Thai Federation of Textiles, Clothing and Leather Workers
TKTU	Thai Kriang Textile Union
TLA	Textile Labour Association (India)

TLC	Thai Labour Campaign
TLSC	Thai Labour Solidarity Committee
TRT	Thai Rak Thai party
UNP	United National Party (Sri Lanka)
WWUG	Women Workers Unity Group (Thailand)

1 Women and labour organizing in Asia

Diversity, autonomy and activism

Kaye Broadbent and Michele Ford

Chun Tae-il, a young Korean tailor, had spent many years trying to attract the attention of authorities and union officials to the inhumane and exploitative conditions experienced by young women employed in Seoul's garment sweatshops. He was ignored and in desperation committed suicide in 1970 by self-immolation. As he died, he shouted 'they are not machines' (Chun 2003), referring to the young women who slaved to produce the goods which fuelled Korea's economic development from the 1960s. His death gave life to a struggle led by women, which, despite brutal oppression by the ruling military dictatorship, challenged the state, employers and the management-friendly, male-dominated textile unions (Koo 2001; Chun 2003; Park 2005). The courage of workers and other activists at this time contributed to an upsurge in democratic unionism in the 1980s, the legacy of which survives in Korea today.

Women have become the new face of industrial labour – and of labour activism – not only in Korea but in all the most and least developed countries of Asia. Export-oriented industrialization strategies favoured throughout East and Southeast Asia, and more recently in parts of the subcontinent, brought with them a feminization first of factory labour and then of the diverse agglomeration of contract and home workers that now produce consumer goods for the world. The rapidly increasing economic importance of the Asian region in the global context highlights the need for detailed analysis of the institutions and practices which constitute civil society in Asia. Globalization, with its opening up of Asia's economies, and the concomitant growth of feminized labour-intensive industries, has shone a spotlight on male-dominated union organizations in the region and their failure to protect women's interests. The chapters in this volume explore women's responses to unions' shortcomings. They examine the strategies female labour activists have employed within and outside the organized labour movements in nine very different Asian contexts, the challenges they face, their frustrations and their successes.

Women and unions

In many ways, the fate of Asian female labour activists has been tied to that of national union movements as a whole. In her chapter on China in this volume,

Fang Lee Cooke reminds us that Chinese unions are fundamentally different from western unions because they are part of the state apparatus rather than an independent vehicle for workers' interests. Many countries in Asia have experienced a similar situation at some time in their post-colonial history. Indonesia's unions were part of a system of authoritarian state corporatism under Suharto's New Order (1967–98), and until the late 1980s Korea's dominant trade union federation, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, functioned as the personnel bureau of the military dictatorship. While unions in Malaysia are not as closely controlled as the state unions of Indonesia's New Order period were, they too occupy a subordinate position within Malaysia's state-dominated industrial relations system (Ford 2002). In contrast, in South Asia, unions are closely tied to political parties. This is the case in India, where the Left remains strongly represented in formal politics (Gillan 2004). Similarly, as Janaka Biyanwila notes in his contribution to this volume, affiliation with political parties has weakened unions in Sri Lanka. Shahidur Rahman observes in his chapter that in Bangladesh, too, the government required every political party to establish a union from 1977 and that this has had a negative effect on union organizing. Although unions' ties to formal politics have proved helpful in some contexts, these contributions show that in others, such ties limit unions' ability to independently mobilize and represent workers.

Unions are weak in many Asian countries as a result of their industrial trajectories and their political histories. However, repressive state structures and overly strong union ties to political parties in the region have not precluded, or even always contained, labour activism. In Korea, Thailand and Indonesia, periods of explosive labour activity have been followed by periods of re-domestication, where the state and capital have reasserted their control over labour. Pro-women unions, often located in the light manufacturing industries, are particularly vulnerable to this economic and political pressure. As Andrew Brown and Saowalak Chaytaweep demonstrate in their contribution to this volume, this has been the case in Thailand where 65 per cent of the manufacturing workers who lost their jobs during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8 were women and where the pro-women Thai Kriang Textile Union (TKTU) was destroyed amidst capital restructuring and the slide towards authoritarianism that occurred under Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai government.

Even when unions are strong, women's issues are seldom on the agenda. The union movement worldwide has a deep tradition of anti-woman bias, and unionization has provided relatively few guarantees for women workers, who have been peripheral to union concerns and largely excluded from union hierarchies. Unions in many countries have been and are male dominated 'numerically, culturally and hierarchically' (Franzway 1997: 129), and in discussions of unionism 'worker' has most often meant 'male worker'. In this way, unions have been constructed in terms that 'conjure up men and deny women' (Pocock 1997: 3). These claims are perhaps even more pertinent to Asian unions than in the European contexts in which unions first emerged. All the contributions to this collection highlight the small number of women in positions of leadership within

mainstream unions and the structural barriers that women face in the union movement, including exclusion from unions on the basis of employment status or the provision of facilities to manage the competing demands of work, activism and family responsibilities. Many of the chapters in this volume point to women's long-standing involvement in the organized labour movement. However, all emphasize the masculinist culture of mainstream unions and their failure to cater sufficiently for women, even where women occupy positions within the union leadership.

A number of chapters in this volume also raise the issue of religion, a theme seldom discussed in relation to western unions, despite the strong Christian presence in the right and centre-left of the international labour movement. Religious doctrines and cultural practices have not prevented Asian women from being active on labour issues, but they have created additional barriers to their activism. Janaka Biyanwila paints a fascinating picture of the Sri Lankan monk who heads an overwhelmingly female nurses' union. The opportunities offered by what Biyanwila describes as a 'moment of social movement unionism' – when progressive monks, doctors, political leaders and the like supported striking nurses after the state enacted emergency regulations against them and froze the union's accounts – were wasted as the nurses retreated to their middle-class role as carers, under the watchful eye of their leader, whose position is shored up by the patriarchal tenets of Buddhism. Meanwhile, Shahidur Rahman demonstrates how conservative Islamic doctrine worked to keep Bangladeshi women in the home before economic pressures forced them into the factories, and Michele Ford suggests that the growing popularity of orthodox Islam in Indonesia is beginning to affect the assumptions and everyday practices of even some secular unions. In China, Japan and Korea, patriarchal Confucian principles in many ways define gender relations and have therefore also influenced the organized labour movement. Ironically, as Cooke explains, progress made by China's authoritarian government towards gender equity has been undermined by the emergence of the market economy. Similarly, Kyoung-Hee Moon and Kaye Broadbent note that Korea's International Monetary Federation (IMF)-imposed economic 'reforms' have resulted in exacerbated gender discriminatory employment practices as more women than men are laid off. In Japan, the impact of the Confucian principle of 'good wife, wise mother' feeds into employers' need for cheap labour, resulting in the gendered construction of part-time work, which excludes many from membership in mainstream unions (Broadbent 2003).

In recent years, the international labour movement has recognized the dangers of marginalizing women not only in Asia but across the globe. In 2003, the Eighth World Women's conference of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU 2003) adopted as its theme 'Unions for Women; Women for Unions', in recognition of the importance of unions as a vehicle for mobilizing women workers and unions' general neglect of women workers. The ICFTU's aim was the development of 'concrete and innovative strategies to (a) make trade unions relevant to working women today; and (b) enhance women's key role in building and strengthening trade unions' (ICFTU 2003: Introduction). Given that

union density is declining internationally, and with it union influence, it is not surprising that union renewal is preoccupying union leaders, union members, activists and academics (Mantzios 1998; IIRA 2000; Fairbrother and Yates 2003; Yamashita 2005) – or that women's increased participation is seen to be an important part of the solution.[1] In industrialized countries, including Japan, the 'woman deficit' is especially important when we consider the expansion of part-time work, where women are disproportionately represented (Bolle 1997) often with lower wages and conditions (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training 2006). In later- and less-developed Asian countries, it is of most concern in regard to the large numbers of women workers located outside the formal sector altogether. This is particularly so as the informal sector, which has always been dominant in many Asian countries, again expands in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and Korea as global corporations and local capital seek to shore up price-sensitive, labour-intensive industries in the face of fierce competition from China and the newly industrializing countries of mainland Southeast Asia.

The impact of the expansion of part-time and contract work, particularly where it occurs in the informal sector, is significant for both unions and women. Lambert and Webster (2004: 140) argue that the growth and feminization of employment in the informal sector is negatively affecting unions. While this point is valuable, it fails to recognize that part of the problem may be the organizing strategies of unions themselves. Central to this is the role of the union movement as an avenue of collective representation for paid workers. Workers who do not have access to unions have little power to bargain with employers for better wages and conditions or to press governments for changes in labour policy. As mainstream unions have been spectacularly unsuccessful in organizing workers in part-time work, let alone the informal sector, the rapid growth of non-traditional forms of paid employment represents a now well-recognized threat to unions' very existence. The resulting global decline in union density has created a 'representation gap' where the number of workers without access to a union is increasing, and women workers are less likely to belong to unions than male workers.

Women have not simply accepted this 'representation gap'. As the chapters by Elizabeth Hill, Kyoung-hee Moon and Kaye Broadbent, and Kaye Broadbent demonstrate, women in India, Korea and Japan have organized women-only unions which have not affiliated with the mainstream union movement and show no indication of seeking affiliation in the future. As these chapters indicate, the success of women-only unions has been mixed. In contrast to the smaller and newly established women-only unions in Japan and Korea, India's Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) organizes half a million women workers in a range of jobs as well as establishing childcare centres and co-operatives. Elsewhere, most notably in Thailand, Indonesia and China, women workers and activists have created non-union vehicles for representing their interests. It is unclear whether these groups intend to formally establish either alternative mixed unions or women-only unions. However, like women-only

unions, these non-union organizations do attempt to overcome issues faced by working women who are excluded from the mainstream labour movement.

Women's organizing strategies within unions and beyond

Much recent grass-roots labour activism in Asia has occurred on the fringes of the formal labour movement, or outside it, in the form of spontaneous labour protests or non-union labour organizing. It is in these fringes, too, that women have been most active, because of their marginal position within both unions and the economy as a whole. In many countries, the divisions between male and female workers, sown by employers through devices such as the family wage, have served to perpetuate existing divisions which have acted to hinder the mobilization of women workers and weaken the collective strength of each country's working class. In analysing the attempts by women workers to overcome sexism in several Anglophone and European countries, Briskin (1993, 1999) identifies two broad strategies: *separate organizing* or the formation of women's committees or departments within mixed unions and *autonomous organizing* or the formation of women-only organizations, of which women-only unions are but one example. The chapters that follow examine separate organizing and autonomous organizing within the labour movement 'proper' as well as new forms of organized labour activism outside the union movement.

Separate organizing

There is an extensive body of literature examining the advantages and limitations of separate organizing as a method of overcoming divisions within the working class in several Anglophone countries (see Cook *et al.* 1984; Milkman 1985; Briskin and McDermott 1993; Gandhi 1996; Hensman 1996; Elton 1997; Mann *et al.* 1997; Pocock 1997; Briskin 1999). In the early days of women's union activism, women's committees were sometimes viewed as disloyal or as dividing the working class (Mackie 2003). In her chapter on Indonesia, Michele Ford notes that this is still the case in some unions, where even well-credentialed women activists like Lilis Mahmudah have questioned the need to have separate structures for women within unions at a time when the labour movement is still struggling to re-establish itself.

More recent analysis in western contexts argues that separate organizing 'has challenged not only male domination of unions' but also a range of other practices which exclude women (Briskin 1999: 546). This view is echoed in Tshoaedi's research in South Africa (Tshoaedi 2002). Major unions in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan have dedicated women's departments, not least because separate organizing structures are strongly promoted by the international union movement, which provides financial and other kinds of support to many unions in the region. However, as Gandhi (1996), Hensman (1996), Elton (1997) and Pocock (1997) argue, there are limitations for women working only within established union structures.

This is due to the reluctance of male-dominated unions to address issues important for women such as the sexual division of labour (Hensman 1996: 201). Even where the union leadership is sympathetic, initiatives are not necessarily acted upon (Elton 1997: 111). In her contribution to this collection, Vicki Crinis suggests that this has been the case in Malaysia, where a new generation of leaders within the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) have introduced women-friendly policies which have failed not only in many of its affiliates but also within parts of the MTUC itself. In short, separate organizing structures are a double-edged sword: in some contexts, they provide valuable space for women to organize within a mainstream union; in other contexts, they serve to marginalize women's concerns.

Autonomous organizing

Briskin differentiates autonomous organizing or 'separatism' from 'separate organizing'. Separate organizing refers to the development of women's structures (e.g. a Women's Directorate) within an existing trade union or union federation. In contrast, autonomous organizing refers to the development of independent, women-only structures while separatism is 'a goal – an end in itself' (Briskin 1999: 545). For Briskin, autonomous organizing is defined broadly and includes all areas where women create women-only organizations, but in this collection, the term is used to refer explicitly to women-only unions.

As early as the 1880s, women workers organized autonomous women-only unions in Australia, England, the USA, Ireland and Denmark essentially to counteract and overcome the problem of largely male-dominated craft-based unions that excluded women, migrants and other unskilled workers. Few of the early women-only unions survived: most were either dissolved or absorbed into existing male unions (Ryan 1984: 37; Jacoby 1994; Nutter 2000). There is very little literature available which analyses the industrial and political impact of the early women-only unions (see Milkman 1985; Jacoby 1994; Nutter 2000), but socialist women were critical of their development. Clara Zetkin (Cliff 1984), Eleanor Marx (Kapp 1976) and Alexandra Kollontai (1918) criticized early women-only unions arguing that it was important women workers be organized within the existing union movement to create a strong and united working class. In a more contemporary assessment, Lewenhak (1977) argued that while liberal feminist in orientation, the achievements of the early women-only unions need to be acknowledged as they emerged at a time when the widespread organization of women and other 'unskilled' workers was in its infancy.

In the 1970s, a 'second wave' of women-only unions was formed in Canada, the USA and Ahmedabad in India (see Hill in this volume). All except for India's SEWA have since dissolved. A 'third wave' of women-only unions has since formed in Japan (see Broadbent in this volume), Korea (see Moon and Broadbent in this volume) and Chennai in India.[2] Milkman's assessment of the US women-only unions formed in the 1970s is positive, concluding that it provided a link between feminism and unionism, introducing women to the

operation and functioning of unions, as well as organizing women excluded from existing mixed unions. She argues it was an important form of organizing in the US context, as it 'implicitly challenge[d] the established traditions of the labor movement while also working to expand the space of women within it' (Milkman 1985: 10). Similarly, an organizer of a women-only union in Chennai, India, Sujata Mody, sees women-only unions as fulfilling an important role for women workers because 'trade unions see her [women workers] need to fight for her economic betterment, [but] they usually ignore her social responsibilities'. She argues that working-class men see women, especially women in low-paid and 'unorganized' sectors of employment, as being in one or the other of these categories – that is as either workers or wives/mothers – which further exacerbates the tensions in women's lives (Mody 2005: 13).

Briskin disagrees with these assessments, claiming that women workers can better achieve their goals through separate organizing within mixed unions and that the weakness of autonomous organizing is that it can create institutionally isolated and resource-poor organizations unable to gain critical mass (Briskin 1999). Not all the chapters on women-only organizing in this collection support her claims. Elizabeth Hill's contribution suggests that India's SEWA is having considerable success in providing women workers with opportunities to improve their working conditions and the material comfort of themselves and their families. Women-only unions in Japan and Korea do suffer from the constraints of an insecure financial base, but this does not mean the strategy of autonomous organizing is a failure and should be rejected. It simply does not follow that women workers' only recourse for mobilization therefore is to organize within mixed unions. The Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) is affiliated with, and receives organizational support from, an umbrella group of working women's organizations, which goes some way to explaining its success in mobilizing larger numbers of women workers than its Japanese counterparts. Affiliation with working women's organizations is a possibility that women-only unions in Japan may also explore.

Organizing outside unions

Finally, as the chapters on Malaysia, China, Thailand and Bangladesh in this collection suggest, many middle-class and working-class Asian women have looked to non-union vehicles for their labour activism. This has also been the case in Indonesia, particularly before the Reform period, which began in 1998 (Ford 2001). Fang Lee Cooke suggests that while non-government organizations (NGOs) remain peripheral in China, and unionists profess to know nothing of them, they are nevertheless also beginning to offer an alternative perspective on workers' rights. In some countries, such as India and Indonesia, non-union workers' groups – often associated with NGOs – have sought, and sometimes achieved, union registration. In other contexts, such as Bangladesh and Malaysia, NGOs have been content to collaborate with unions on labour issues. These developments represent a third trend, excluded from Briskin's analysis,

but important in the Asian context (Ford 2001, 2004), where non-union organizations have played a vital role in organizing women workers employed in the informal sector, in non-traditional capacities within the formal sector, and sometimes even at the core of the traditional formal sector.

The structure of the book

Women labour activists have suffered what Pocock (1997: 3) describes for Australia as 'the absence of a well-established, written tradition'. This applies equally to women workers and activists in the countries in the Asian region covered in this volume. In recent decades, there has been a concerted attempt by researchers to redress the absence of women in histories of national union movements by documenting the nature and extent of women workers' union activism in Europe, the USA and Australia (Cook *et al.* 1984; Soldon 1985). Yet, there is no comparable body of research examining the experiences of women's activism and union organizing in the Asian region within a comparative context (see Chhachhi and Pittin 1996; Hutchison and Brown 2001). We know little about how women were able to achieve the gains they have, given that the state, employers, male union officials and union members have either excluded women from joining unions or restricted the scope and quality of their participation.

Bringing together authors who work on questions of women's labour organizing from a range of disciplinary perspectives, this volume seeks to at least begin to fill the gap. In doing so, it explores two principal themes: first, while documenting the specificities of individual national contexts, it identifies and emphasizes the similarities in women's experiences of union activism and the barriers that women labour activists face: male dominance in union positions and over union agendas; negative and stereotypical attitudes towards women active in unions; and a host of other gender, cultural, social, ethnic and religious obstacles. The second theme focuses on the different organizing strategies and vehicles that women have adopted in their efforts to overcome the tensions they experience in their relationship with the mainstream union movement. Each of the chapters that follow shows how women have and continue to play an active role in the labour movements in their country, with many at the forefront of groups using organizing strategies that are attempting to change the culture of trade unions. In doing so, they demonstrate that women workers and union activists throughout the region have been – and are – active in a range of campaigns that focus primarily on women but address issues which affect all workers.

This book is divided into two sections. The six contributions that constitute the first section deal with women organizing within mainstream, mixed unions and in non-union organizations. Most of these chapters describe separate organizing strategies, where activists have established women-only structures within mainstream unions. Almost all also make mention of women unionists' alliances with women in non-union structures, such as NGOs or organizations within the

women's movement. The three chapters in the second section then focus primarily on autonomous women-only unions, highlighting women workers' and women union activists' search for new forms of organization and collective representation.

The first section begins with Michele Ford's case study of separate organizing in Indonesia since President Suharto was deposed in mid-1998. Ford focuses on women unionists' strategies for strengthening their position within the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Unions (FSPMI), the national-level federation that incorporates the female-dominated Electrical and Electronics Workers Union. This case study is contextualized in a broader discussion of the challenges female union activists face in post-Suharto Indonesia, where women are struggling to gain proper recognition within a union movement that is still finding its feet after decades of repression. Ford argues that while separate organizing has its difficulties, separate structures within Indonesia's larger unions have provided space for generating momentum for better representation of women in union hierarchies and for keeping women's issues on the union agenda.

In Chapter 3, Fang Lee Cooke argues that in authoritarian China, the women's departments of the state-sponsored trade unions and the state-sponsored women's movement have been a (limited) force for gender equity and improved conditions for women workers but not for collective identity or collective action. Cooke explores these claims with reference to local unions in two hospitals, supplemented by survey data collected in Fujian province, which suggest that a large number of female unionists had little faith in their unions' ability to represent their interests or solve problems in the workplace. Meanwhile, Cooke notes, local and international NGOs are beginning to make their presence felt in China's Southeast, where they provide support for local and migrant women workers, both in the form of service-provision and as assistance for community- and factory-based organizing. However, to date, these NGOs have access to only a tiny proportion of China's workforce and thus have had little real power to effect change for workers, leaving women reliant on state-sanctioned representational bodies.

In Chapter 4, Vicki Crinis also uses a multi-level approach to explore women's involvement in Malaysian trade unions since the 1960s. Crinis first examines the role of the MTUCs Women's Committee and its collaborations with women's groups and NGOs. She then demonstrates how union culture, along with state and economic policies – including the promotion of large-scale international labour migration – determines women's position in three state-based garment and textile unions. Crinis argues that while women are active on labour issues, the patriarchal culture of Malaysian unions has made it difficult for them to achieve adequate representation within unions, particularly in blue-collar sector unions, despite the best efforts of those unions' separate structures for women.

In Chapter 5, Janaka Biyanwila focuses on the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU), the main nurse's union in Sri Lanka, highlighting the impact

of the limits of solidarity and the role male leadership plays in containing women's labour activism. The chapter explains how the militancy exhibited by the PSUNU in its campaigns against poor working conditions in the early- to mid-1980s dissipated in favour of divisive campaigns along class lines against less-educated hospital workers. Biyanwila argues that while the majority of its leadership positions are held by women, the PSUNU's classist, ethno-nationalist approach, along with its failure to establish links with other unions and other social movements (in particular the women's movement), has seriously limited its transformative potential.

In Chapter 6, Shahidur Rahman compares an independent female-dominated union with a female-controlled executive – formed with the support of local NGOs and international solidarity support organizations – with an employer-initiated welfare committee in Bangladesh. He argues that while the welfare committee achieved concrete outcomes for women workers in terms of health-care, access to childcare, cheap shopping and entertainment, it has done little to empower them. In contrast, he suggests that the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF), with its NGO connections, its female-majority membership and its bottom-up approach, offers a real opportunity for women to come together and achieve social change.

Chapter 7, the final chapter in the first section of the collection, documents the leading role women have played both in unions and in alternative forms of labour activism in Thailand since the beginning of the 1990s. Andrew Brown and Saowalak Chaytaweep explain how women have succeeded in expanding the political space available to labour by working around state-imposed limits on trade union organizing to establish first the Thai Labour Solidarity Committee (TLSC) and then the Thai Labour Campaign (TLC). Brown and Chaytaweep argue that these non-union labour organizations have rejected the narrow, nationally based institutional focus adopted by Thai trade unions in order to build networks between a whole range of local and international institutions that have an interest in labour issues – in the process, creating a new generation of female labour activists.

The second section begins with Elizabeth Hill's analysis of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India. Hill argues that Indian women had long experienced exclusionary practices within the formal labour movement, prompting activists to establish SEWA, a women-only union, in 1971. SEWA organizes women, including those who work as labourers on construction sites or as industrial home-based workers. Hill demonstrates how SEWA challenges many aspects of traditional unionism through its focus on the full range of forms of women's productive work and its holistic approach to women workers' lives. She concludes that SEWA's longevity and vibrancy belies claims that women are not interested in organizing, suggesting instead that traditional male-centred models of unionism are at fault for women's poor participation in mainstream Indian unions.

In Chapter 9, Kyoung-hee Moon and Kaye Broadbent examine the economic and political background to the formation of autonomous women-only unions in

Korea. Their discussion reinforces the notion that women are indeed interested in industrial issues and as committed as male workers to industrial action – often in the face of a lack of solidarity on the part of the male union leadership and male union members. Indeed, it was the ease with which the male union leadership abandoned the struggles of women workers and the lack of continued solidarity that prompted women workers and activists to form women-only unions, independent of mixed mainstream unions. Women-only unions in Korea have not completely abandoned wider class struggles; rather, they have continued to co-operate in broad campaigns with mainstream mixed unions. The success of the KWTU in mobilizing growing numbers of women workers indicates women-only unions in other countries such as Japan may be able to overcome the insecurity of their financial base by affiliating with other women's organizations.

The growth and success in the KWTU's efforts to mobilize women workers contrasts with the more modest success of Japan's women-only unions. In Chapter 10, Kaye Broadbent argues that despite their weaknesses, women-only unions nevertheless have achieved positive outcomes not only for the women workers they organize, which are largely individual outcomes, but for all workers in Japan through their support of campaigns and actions to improve conditions and the treatment of part-time and temporary workers. They have also been successful in linking women workers, excluded from mainstream mixed unions, into broader working-class politics. Financial insecurity, however, is a constant concern for Japan's women-only unions, which are constantly challenged by the need to look for alternative strategies to enable them to grow and develop critical mass. Like their sister women-only unions in Korea, the answer may lie in developing broader connections with other organizations.

Conclusion

Declining union membership and strategies for union renewal are issues of debate for academics, union officials and union members worldwide (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998; IIRA 2000; Fairbrother and Yates 2003). This examination of women workers' activism in Asia contributes to this debate. It is clear from the chapters that follow that despite the numerous economic, political, structural, religious, cultural and social obstacles faced by women workers in the countries we discuss, a critical mass of women workers is vitally concerned with work-related issues and interested in actively pursuing these issues through mainstream mixed unions, women-only unions or non-union organizations such as NGOs.

It is understandable that many workers, women and men, are critical of separate women's committees and women-only unions, particularly in countries where unions are viewed with hostility and suspicion by the state or employers. What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that in drawing attention to issues affecting women workers, separate organizing structures such as women's departments and committees provide an opportunity within mixed unions to

better integrate this important and often-neglected constituency. In the same way, women-only unions address the needs of a growing number of non-unionized women workers who are not part of the traditional constituency of mainstream, male-dominated unions. In doing so, they extend collective representation to workers who may have had little experience of unionism or other forms of collective working-class action. What mixed mainstream union leaders and union members must remember is that employers, the state and patriarchal cultures divide the working class according to employment status, gender, ethnicity and religion. What we understand from the following chapters is that women are resisting these impulses in a number of innovative ways which have the potential to have a transformative impact on the trajectories of working-class movements throughout Asia.

Notes

1 Union density measures union membership as a proportion of the eligible workforce. For Europe, where data are available, indications are that the 'clear trend in union density is downward across Europe' (European Foundation 2003). See also Bronfenbrenner *et al.* (1998).

2 The Penn Thozhilalargal Sangam was originally the women's wing of the Tamil Nadu Construction Workers Union. It organizes 2500 women from the construction and quarrying, domestic services and garments and tailoring industries, which are the three largest employers of women workers (Mody 2005: 13).

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2 Indonesia

Separate organizing within unions

Michele Ford

The revitalization of the Indonesian labour movement began in the feminized, labour-intensive export-oriented industries from the early 1990s after decades of repression by Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98). After the New Order fell in 1998, it was workers' organizations in these same feminized sectors that most eagerly embraced new opportunities to register and operate as formally recognized unions. Women comprise the bulk of workers (and union members) in textile, clothing and footwear (TCF) and in other labour-intensive export-oriented industries such as electronics. However, they have relatively little access to executive positions at even the plant and branch levels, let alone positions in unions' central committees.

As the introduction to this volume indicates, one of the strategies women adopt in order to strengthen their position in the union movement is that of separate organizing; that is, by developing women's departments or other kinds of women-only structures within a mixed-gender trade union. There is a long history of separate organizing in Indonesia, which began after independence and was quite successful during the Suharto years. The strategy has continued to be important in the post-Suharto period. This chapter examines how effective separate organizing has been in the case of the *Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia* (FSPMI, Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Unions). FSPMI is a national union federation to which both the male-dominated automotive and metalworkers and the female-dominated electronics and electrical unions are affiliated. FSPMI has a national women's directorate and women-only structures at the national, branch and plant levels within at least some of its affiliates. Within the context of separate organizing, this chapter discusses the challenges faced by women unionists in FSPMI, the strategies they have adopted to advance women's standing within the union and the role international union bodies have played in facilitating their initiatives. It draws on interviews with FSPMI officials and members and participant-observation at FSPMI meetings and training activities. Case study data are supplemented by primary and secondary data on women's participation in other Indonesian unions; participation in a wide range of labour non-government organizations (NGOs) and union meetings and training workshops in Indonesia since 1999; and interviews with local unionists and international

trade union donors conducted in June 2003, in June–July 2005 and again in February and July–August 2006.

This chapter begins by explaining the economic and political context in which the Indonesian union movement re-emerged after the New Order. It then goes on to discuss women's involvement in trade unions, the challenges women activists face in their union work and the strategies they use to improve their position in the unions within the export-oriented light manufacturing sector as a whole. The third section takes a closer look at the particular case of FSPMI, examining the challenges encountered by female union activists and their responses, which have been framed within the principles of separate organizing. This chapter argues that in FSPMI's case, separate organizing, although not completely successful, has been a useful strategy for improving the visibility of women's issues and the position of women within union structures.

The re-emergence of Indonesian trade unionism

Indonesia has an established history of labour activism. Trade unions were an integral part of the nationalist movement in the final decades of Dutch colonial rule and continued to wield significant power under Indonesia's first president, Sukarno (1945–65). Their influence was curbed under Suharto's New Order when they, along with other mass organizations, were integrated into the regime's authoritarian state corporatist structures (Hadiz 1997; Ford 1999). Under the New Order, the right to organize was largely confined to blue-collar workers in the private sector, intentionally excluding the traditionally strongly unionized areas of the public service and state-owned enterprises. The state-sanctioned union was dominated by government bureaucrats and businesspeople, and although some labour activists attempted to reform it from within, the union's primary task was to control workers rather than to represent them. This forced labour activists to organize outside the official union structures.

Alternative forms of labour activism emerged predominantly in the feminized, labour-intensive TCF industries following Indonesia's shift to an export-oriented economy in the 1980s. The alternative labour movement, which consisted of NGOs and student groups, and the workers' groups they sponsored, along with self-styled 'alternative unions' and spontaneous worker actions, raised the profile of Indonesian workers both at home and abroad (Ford 2006b). After President Suharto resigned in May 1998, it was international pressure rather than domestic activism that was most influential in forcing Suharto's successor Habibie to ease restrictions on workers' freedom to organize (Ford 1999, 2000; Caraway 2004). Nevertheless, an explosion in the number of trade unions occurred within months of the first new labour regulations coming into force in mid-1998 (Ford 1999, 2004). By 2005, over 18,000 plant-level unions had registered, many of which were associated with the dozens of union federations and three confederations – the *Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia* (KSPSI, Confederation of All-Indonesia Workers' Unions), the *Konfederasi Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia* (KSBSI, Confederation of Indonesian Pros-

perous Trade Unions) and the *Kongres Serikat Pekerja Indonesia* (KSPI, Indonesian Trade Union Congress) – by then registered at the national level. Some of the most influential of Indonesia's new unions are in tertiary sector occupations such as finance and hospitality, but unions in the feminized, export-oriented light manufacturing industries remain at the core of the Indonesian labour movement.

The union movement re-emerged at a difficult time. Indonesia suffered badly as a result of the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8, which had led to the collapse of the rupiah, the fall of Suharto and increasing investor uncertainty with regard to national, political and economic stability. Although the crisis had little effect on overall labour force-participation rates, it shifted the balance of the labour market away from the underdeveloped formal sector.[1] Formal sector employment accounts for a relatively small proportion of all employment opportunities in Indonesia, with between 30–40 per cent of working men and 20–30 per cent of working women employed in waged or salaried positions. The remainder of working Indonesians are engaged in agriculture, 'independent economic activity' or family businesses. The number of agricultural workers shrank as a proportion of the overall labour force from the 1970s. However, the sector remains a major source of employment, especially for women, although they are most concentrated (as a percentage of all employees) in manufacturing and trade (Table 2.1).[2] The service sector, which provides employment opportunities for the majority of 'independent' or family workers, is primarily informal in nature. In total, more than 50 per cent of women and around 43 per cent of men were employed in informal sector occupations in the late 1990s (Feridhanusetyawan 2000; Irawan *et al.* 2000).

Before the crisis, the formal sector – and particularly secondary industry – had experienced strong growth for nearly two decades. But in 1997–8, manufacturing employment contracted by more than 11 per cent. During this period, the agricultural sector absorbed many of the workers who lost their formal sector jobs, and the percentage of people employed in the informal sector rose significantly from an overall low of about 41 per cent in 1995 to approximately 46 per cent in 1998–9 (Feridhanusetyawan 2000). In 1999, the official unemployment rate was under 7 per cent, rising to just under 10 per cent in 2004, but these official unemployment figures are highly deceptive because they mask serious underemployment and relatively low labour force-participation rates. For Indonesian men, the employment to population ratio is approximately 80 per cent, while for women it has averaged between 40 and 50 per cent. In addition, in 2005 almost 29 per cent of employed women and 13 per cent of employed men work fewer than 25 hours per week, while over 6 per cent of employed women and 3 per cent of employed men work fewer than ten hours per week (Depnakertrans 2005a).

Within the formal sector itself, there are significant disparities between the wages paid to expatriates and high-skilled local professionals employed by multinational corporations and agencies and those paid to civil servants and employees of local companies. There are also large gaps between the wages of

Table 2.1 Employed persons by sex and main industry, 2003

Industry	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Females as % total*	*% female employment*
Agriculture	27,385,000	14,616,000	42,001,000	34.8	47.3
Manufacturing	6,539,000	4,388,000	10,927,000	40.2	14.2
Construction	3,977,000	130,000	4,107,000	3.2	0.4
Trade	9,303,000	7,543,000	16,846,000	44.8	24.4
Transport	4,814,000	163,000	4,977,000	3.3	0.5
Finance	953,000	342,000	1,295,000	26.4	1.1
Services	6,151,000	3,595,000	9,746,000	36.9	11.6
Other	786,000	99,000	885,000	11.2	2.5
Total	59,909,000[a]	30,876,000	90,785,000[a]	34.0	102[a]

Source: Raw data taken from Depnakertrans (2003a).

Notes
a Discrepancies in these totals introduced by rounding.

managerial staff and low-level employees within companies. In March 2000, production workers – who constitute the majority of union members in secondary industry – earned a median wage of between Rp.68,500 (approximately US$7.21) and Rp.214,900 (approximately US$22.62) per week depending upon the industrial sector in which they were employed (Badan Pusat Statistik 2000). According to Department of Manpower statistics, in 2005 women working in manufacturing earned an average monthly wage of Rp.536,250 or approximately US$59.00 per month (Depnakertrans 2005b). Low wages mean that workers in these industries have to take on large amounts of overtime in order to cover their basic living costs and are unable to pay hefty union dues. As a consequence, most unions are heavily reliant on external funding for even their day-to-day operations.

Significant gains have been achieved by the Indonesian labour movement since the fall of Suharto, but the limited size of the formal sector, high levels of unemployment and underemployment and the limited resources of Indonesian workers constitute important challenges to Indonesia's fledgling unions.[3] Although self-verified membership of the three confederations totalled almost eight million in 2002 (Quinn 2003), Department of Manpower and Transmigration figures based on data received from the provincial and local level as of September 2005 suggest that the 64 national-level unions and union federations which fulfilled the requirements necessary to be represented in industrial relations institutions had a total membership of only 3,388,597 (Depnakertrans 2005c). Based on these conservative figures, which undoubtedly understate the extent of union membership, just 3.6 per cent of Indonesia's total employed workforce of almost 95 million are union members and union density in the formal sector is approximately 11 per cent. Given that there are now multiple unions in many of Indonesia's 180,000 registered enterprises, these statistics suggest that union penetration is also poor (Boulton 2006). Likewise, although unions have certainly improved their representativeness and ability to negotiate effectively on behalf of their members, they continue to face severe political and structural challenges at the local and national levels, which, as demonstrated below, affect the extent to which they are willing and/or able to address the specific concerns of their female members.

Women's involvement in the union movement

Women have had a long-standing, and occasionally high-profile, presence in the Indonesian labour movement. S.K. Trimurti was the Republic's first minister for labour (1947–8), a trade unionist, a member of the *Partai Buruh Indonesia* (PBI, Indonesian Labour Party) and head of the *Barisan Buruh Wanita* (BBW, The Women's Labour Front). She was later a member of the transitional parliament from 1966 to 1971.[4] However, the visibility of Trimurti and others like her did not translate into influence within union structures in post-independence Indonesia, and in the Sukarno years (1945–65) women were poorly represented in the leadership even of unions with a significant proportion of female members

(Elliott 1997). Women continued to have little power in the official union bodies under Suharto's New Order, although the *Lembaga Wanita, Remaja dan Anak* (LWRA, Women, Teenagers and Children's Institute), discussed below, was quite effective. Women played more of a role in alternative labour organizing in the late-Suharto period, particularly those parts of the movement linked to feminist NGOs and, to a lesser extent, labour NGOs and the student movement. The alternative labour movement involved hundreds of women activists at the grassroots level and produced high-profile union leaders such as Dita Sari and worker-martyrs like Marsinah (see Ford 2003).

It is difficult to quantify women's level of engagement in the unions established after 1998. There are no national-level statistics available on the density and distribution of women either in the official union(s) of the Suharto period or in the unions that have developed since, and only a few individual unions have even internal access to reliable sex-disaggregated membership data (interviews June 2003, June–July 2005). Perhaps the most comprehensive data available at the national level is that collected for an International Labour Organization (ILO) report in 2005, when Reerink (2006) surveyed 33 women activists from the three major confederations, 15 national federations and seven company-level unions with national-level affiliations. Her survey confirmed that none of the three major confederations had sex-disaggregated data. However, they did provide figures on women's representation at the highest levels of their organizations. In 2005, only two of KSPSI's 11-member Central Executive (treasurer and deputy treasurer) and one of KSBSI's five-member Central Executive (treasurer) were women. There were no women on the KSPI's 13-member Central Executive.

Of the national unions and union federations included in Reerink's survey, only four had figures on the male–female ratio amongst their members. Three of these were affiliates of the KSPI. In 2002, 37 per cent of the 1,562,030 members of the *Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia* (PGRI, Indonesian Teachers Union) were women. In 2003, women comprised 69 per cent of the 501,321 members of *Serikat Pekerja Nasional* (SPN, National Workers Union), a major union in the TCF sector. For the same year, FSPMI reported that women comprised 39 per cent of their overall membership of 77,158.[5] Meanwhile, *Garteks*, the garment and textile affiliate of KSBSI, reported that women comprised 83 per cent of 15,968 members in 2004. As Table 2.2 demonstrates, PGRI is the only one of these unions for which the gender balance of the central executive was roughly

Table 2.2 Female leaders in national-level unions and union federations

Organization	*Period*	*Executive*	*other*	*Local*
FSPMI	2001–6	0/15	0/10 affiliated sectors	n.a.
GARTEKS	2003–7	3/5	n.a.	n.a.
PGRI	2003–8	3/11	4/10 departmental secretaries	n.a.
SPN	2003–7	3/13	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Adapted from Reerink (2006).

equivalent to that of its membership at the time of the survey. Two of the three women on the PGRI Executive Board were deputy secretaries-general, while the third was the deputy treasurer. The four female departmental secretaries were responsible for information and communication; women's empowerment; education; and the arts, culture and sport. In SPN, women served as the chairperson and secretary of the women's empowerment department and the chairperson of the organizing and education department. *Garteks*, the most female-dominated of the four, has a male chairperson and secretary-general. Two of its female executive members serve as deputy chairs, and the third is the treasurer.

As Reerink (2006) notes, women are better represented in the smaller union federations such as the *Gabugan Serikat Buruh Indonesia* (GSBI, Indonesian Labour Union Association) and in regional unions such as Surabaya's *Serikat Buruh Regional* (SBR, Regional Trade Union). One of the primary reasons for the stronger position of women in some of these smaller unions is that many of them grew out of the NGO and student initiatives of the mid–late 1990s. The parts of the alternative labour movement associated with the student movement had a mixed record on women's participation and questions of gender at the grass roots but produced some high-profile women activists. Feminist NGOs generally focused specifically on women workers, promoting women's empowerment as a matter of principle, while the majority of other labour NGOs – many of which were themselves not particularly 'gender-sensitive' – were influenced by international programmes and funding priorities that demanded that NGOs promote women's participation in their activities and endeavour to develop workers' understanding of gender (interviews 1999, 2000, 2001). However, even in these cases, women are under-represented in the union leadership. Women comprised only 30 per cent of GSBI's Central Executive in 2006 even though approximately 70 per cent of its members were women (interview September 2006).

Challenges for women unionists

When asked about the challenges women face, experienced female Indonesian labour activists raise a list of concerns that echoes the concerns of women unionists around the world (Franzway 1997; Pocock 1997; Briskin 2006). These include the impact of the nature of work and of women's other priorities, particularly their families, on their ability and their willingness to participate in union activities. In addition, women unionists argue there are significant cultural limitations on the opportunities available to those who wish to engage (interviews June–July 2005). For example, the timing and nature of union activities mean that women have to get permission from their supervisors to attend seminars and trainings held during work hours. Activist women say permission is more likely to be denied than if sought by their male colleagues, and that they face social sanctions for going to union meetings that carry on late into the night or over entire weekends.[6] Male and female unionists alike cite women's reluctance to become actively involved in union activities and the impact of women's

other commitments on their union activism. Unionists interviewed described case after case where even the most active of union women had abandoned their union commitments upon marriage (interviews June–July 2006). According to members of the women's department of a major union confederation, for example, there is a policy that women must be involved in every level of its structures, but 'the obstacle is the women themselves and their families' (interview July 2005). Interviews with female union members and non-unionized women workers confirm that many women are reluctant to engage in union activities because of family commitments or, in the case of single woman, the imposition union activities represent on their limited leisure time.[7]

Women also face many challenges within the 'harsh environment – the territory of men' that Indonesian unions are perceived to be (interview July 2005). They must battle entrenched networks within unions, which tend to favour the same small group of official and unofficial (mostly male) power-holders (Ford 2006a). Where they are involved in union power structures, many union women are engaged in relatively peripheral tasks. In the words of two women from different unions (interviewed separately), female union officials – who hold positions such as deputy treasurer or deputy secretary and whose duties revolve around tasks such as greeting guests and organizing catering – are 'just the accessories of democracy' or 'symbols to demonstrate that unions are democratic' (interviews July 2005). One of the senior female activists who made these comments spoke scornfully about her fellow women unionists, saying 'The quality of women involved in the union movement is very low, and they actually like doing that kind of stuff' (interview 4 July 2005). The increasing religiosity of Indonesians is creating a further barrier to women's equal participation in unions, as male unionists call on their understandings of Islamic principles to reinforce their position; something that is far more difficult for women to oppose than other forms of discrimination. For example, in a meeting of a relatively progressive union with an active women's department I attended in February 2006, two otherwise very assertive women running a focus group on proposed changes to Law No. 13/2003 on Manpower were silenced by a male unionist invoking Islamic principles on women's right to be involved in activities outside the house after dark when not in the company of a male relative.

Women unionists also have to battle the kind of entrenched day-to-day sexism which means that many male unionists still assume that if there is a female present she will take the notes, because she will be 'neater' and 'more careful' than a man. In short, many women activists feel that they have little opportunity to participate in union activities, and if they do participate, they have to be better than their male counterparts if they want to be taken seriously. The problem of tokenism in particular is a very difficult one: while increased representation of women in unions' organizational structures is a major priority for many female unionists, the appointment of women simply to meet representational targets (most often set by international trade union donors) undermines the legitimacy of union women. There are, however, many women who do choose to continue the struggle to gain a more equal footing in their unions, not

least because of the personal satisfaction and sense of empowerment that the struggle itself brings. In the words of one plant-level female union activist associated with the FSPMI, 'If we're active in the union, we will have no career, but we know that change is achieved through involvement in the organization and we feel different from the others' (interview July 2005). Echoing this sentiment, a national-level female union organizer commented that the union had been 'a substitute for university' for her, because it had expanded her horizons and given her a whole new understanding of her position in society (interview July 2005).

Autonomous and separate organizing strategies

Autonomous organizing, as defined by Briskin (1993, 1999), refers to the development of women-only labour organizations such as women-only unions. Attempts at autonomous organizing have not been common in Indonesia. There are anecdotal reports of some plant-level unions which are composed entirely of women in the post-Suharto period. However, these are not formally women-only unions because discrimination is forbidden under the Trade Union Act (Law No. 21/2000) which says that unions must be 'open' – that is non-discriminatory with regard to political allegiance, religion, ethnicity and sex (Depnakertrans 2004). Major women-only initiatives have taken the form of extra-union women's gatherings and associations, most notably the Indonesian Forum of Women Leaders and Activists (Forum Perempuan).[8] The Forum was established in 2001 following an Indonesia-wide meeting of 200 women unionists in November 2000.[9] It officially covers the whole of Indonesia, although its membership is concentrated in the Greater Jakarta area, Surabaya and Central Java (interview July 2005).[10] As one Forum member indicated, while the Forum can survive without significant external funding, it cannot operate effectively (interview 21 July 2005). Forum members do not see their organization as an alternative to mainstream unionism but as a vehicle for developing women's capacity so they can take their place as union officials with equal rights and opportunities.[11] According to one of its founding members, the Forum was not meant to replace unions or seen as a means of getting around the law against women-only unions but is a means of empowering women to participate more fully in their unions (interview July 2005). However, the Forum's activities have nonetheless met with resistance from many of the unions. In the words of one active Forum member, 'They see us as competition – if we're vocal when we go back to our unions, it causes problems' (interview July 2005). Another member commented, 'It's the unions themselves that are the problem. Some unions have even demanded that women choose between them and us' (interview July 2005).[12]

In contrast, separate organizing refers to the development of women's structures within a mainstream union. As indicated earlier, separate organizing strategies have been an important part of women's responses to the challenges they face within unions and outside them. Separate organizing began in Indonesia in

the mid-1940s with the Women's Labour Front, but it became particularly prominent in the New Order period, when organized labour was at its weakest. The LWRA, established in 1986, was the department for women, teenagers and children within the *Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia* (SPSI, All-Indonesia Workers' Union), the only trade union organization officially permitted in the Suharto period. As Hadiz (1997) observes, the LWRA, which focused primarily on women' issues, was considerably more effective than SPSI as a whole. According to Ari Sunarijati, a long-term labour activist and former secretary of the LWRA, members of the department had significant freedom to organize workers precisely because they were not taken seriously by the union hierarchy. The union provided no resources other than a legal identity and an office, but the LWRA raised money from international donors and other sources. LWRA worked with the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation and some Catholic labour NGOs to run education, research and shelter programs for women workers for over ten years in Surabaya, Jakarta and Sukabumi (interview July 2005).

The tradition of separate organizing has continued after the fall of Suharto. Almost all national unions surveyed by Reerink (2006) have a separate structure for women, at least at the national level. However, 'women's issues' are seldom, if ever, regarded as a high priority by Indonesian unions. At all levels, women's concerns have yet to be considered serious organizational issues and do not become a priority unless the woman involved is *cukup fighter* (quite a fighter). According to women unionists, this creates a significant problem, because in Indonesian culture many women – especially working-class women – do not feel they can impose their will on men. In addition to overcoming the barriers posed by male unionists, then, women activists believe that they need to 'teach union women that they can act differently in their official capacities from the way they act in society in general' (interview July 2005). However, as another female union activist noted, even assertive women had difficulty getting recognized within their unions. Speaking about her initial experiences, she explained that she had to fight the system to get noticed: 'If they didn't involve me, I'd involve myself. If I wasn't invited, I'd just arrive. That's just what women have to do' (interview July 2005). She quickly added that women activists who take these steps are not always appreciated by their male counterparts, because once they become 'brave', they are considered a threat.

It is important to note also that not all unionists support separate organizing strategies. Male unionists, and a significant number of union women, argue that there are more important agendas that must be pursued if Indonesia's fledgling unions are to be viable (interviews 2003 and 2005). One particularly salient example of this objection to separate organizing is SPN, a major union in the garment and textile industries. SPN considers itself to be 'progressive' on women's issues. Its Women's Movement and the Protection of Child Workers' programme is one of four programmes at the central union level. However, unlike most other national unions, it does not have a women's department or committee, because when women activists put forward the notion of a women's committee, union leaders objected on the grounds that it would 'create an

organization within an organization' (interview with Lilis Mahmudah September 2006). Lilis, a long-standing women's activist within SPN, is herself ambivalent about the absence of a women's department. On the one hand, she was one of the women who proposed its establishment, but on the other she feels that it is the responsibility of the organization as a whole – not just of women members – to improve the position of women in the union:

> It's difficult. I always say to my colleagues that responsibility for raising the status of women workers is not the responsibility of women themselves, but the responsibility of the entire organization. In that sense it's wrong for me to suggest it be the responsibility of a women's department – that'd be a form of gender bias. The entire organization should be cognisant of the fact that the majority of our due-paying members are women. They should be in no doubt that women need to be given the opportunity, the space and the time to take part in the decision-making processes of the organization.
>
> (Interview September 2006)

Nevertheless, separate organizing remains a prominent strategy, not least because it is promoted by international union organizations. As demonstrated in the case study of FSPMI below, international support for flexible organizing strategies has played a significant role in the shaping of women's responses to the challenges they face within the union movement.

Separate organizing within the FSPMI

FSPMI incorporates the *Serikat Pekerja Elektronik Elektrik* (SPEE, Electrical and Electronic Workers Union), the major union in the female-dominated export-oriented electronics sector. FSPMI is affiliated to the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) – the Global Union Federation (GUF) responsible for the metals, electrical and electronics industries. FSPMI is in some ways a very typical union of the post-Suharto period. The IMF assisted with FSPMI's formation in 1999, not long after it expelled FSPMI's Suharto-era predecessor from its ranks. FSPMI is a middle-of-the-road union concerned primarily with developing effective workplace-bargaining procedures. It is affiliated with KSPI, the second-generation breakaway from the official union federation of the Suharto period formed in June 2002, which, at the time of its formation, enjoyed the confidence of important international actors including the ILO and many of the GUFs. In other ways, however, FSPMI is quite atypical. The Federation quickly developed financial independence after it adopted a centralized dues structure, as opposed to the branch-dependent structure commonly used by Indonesian unions. This has empowered the central executive, enabling it to take a proactive role both in internal union matters and on the national stage. In addition, FSPMI stands out administratively as one of the few Indonesian union federations capable of systematic, regular collection and processing of membership data (see Ford 2004).[13]

FSPMI is also distinctive because of the large variations in the proportion of women as a percentage of the membership of each of its affiliated unions. In 2001, women represented between 2.5 and 64.3 per cent of the members of FSPMI's three largest affiliates, reflecting the workforce composition in the industries concerned (Table 2.3). Although the gap has since contracted, there remain significant differences between women's participation in the unions affiliated to FSPMI, with women accounting for 61.5 per cent of members in the SPEE, the most feminized of FSPMI's affiliates, and only 8.5 per cent of the Automotive Workers Union in 2005. Although a significant proportion of its members are women, in 2006, there were no women on the Federation's executive committee (interview with general secretary of FSPMI October 2006). Likewise, even SPEE, the most female-dominated of its affiliates, has an extremely low level of female representation on its central and branch committees. In 2006, there was only one female member on SPEE's nine-member executive and very few women leaders at the branch level of the union. Female representation within plant-level union structures are little better. In 2005, 4.2 per cent of plant-level union officials in all FSPMI affiliates were women (Direktorat Perempuan FSPMI 2006a).

Women's poor representation on the unions' decision-making bodies is reflected in the low priority given to women's issues. Despite its strong financial position, FSPMI has relied primarily on external funding for its programmes for women. When female union members initially lobbied for separate organizing structures within the union, their efforts were met with significant opposition. According to the male secretary general of the Federation, the union leadership was resistant at first because they felt there were 'almost no activist women'; it

Table 2.3 Breakdown by sex of membership in three FSPMI unions, 2001–2005

		Automotive Workers Union	*Metalworkers Union*	*Electrical and Electronic Workers Union*
2001	Males	12,659	20,969	14,596
	Females	1,825	548	26,298
	Females as % of total	12.6	2.5	64.3
2002	Males	15,436	15,832	16,100
	Females	1,321	3,794	24,665
	Females as % of total	7.9	19.3	60.5
2003	Males	18,657	16,218	17,328
	Females	1,616	3,795	22,608
	Females as % of total	8.0	19.0	56.6
2004	Males	19,782	15,017	20,398
	Females	1,662	3,239	25,060
	Females as % of total	7.8	17.7	55.1
2005	Males	19,684	15,178	19,558
	Females	1,831	3,374	31,197
	Females as % of total	8.5	18.2	61.5

Sources: Raw data drawn from FSPMI (2004); FSPMI (2005); Direktorat Perempuan FSPMI (2006a).

was difficult to get dispensation for women to attend training and union meetings because they mostly work on the production line and because husbands and family do not approve of women's activism, particularly if it requires them to be out at night (interview July 2005). Women activists within the union eventually overcame this opposition by appealing to the IMF, which sponsored a gender-needs analysis in 2003. As a result of that analysis, which identified a lack of leadership for women and the need to empower women to take up leadership roles, the IMF put pressure on its affiliate to form a women's department and to improve women's representation in the union's structures. The IMF also provided money for a three-year programme both for training for women and to educate men about women's rights (interview with IMF representative July 2005). Having been forced to acquiesce, male union officials requested that women be initially provided with leadership training rather than gender training because they were worried about being caught up in debates about whether women get enough opportunities and wanted to focus on 'real change' instead (interview July 2005).

FSPMI's Women's Directorate, officially established in 2004, had a staff of seven women, all of whom still work in companies, in mid-2005. These women activists argued for the formation of the directorate, because they felt that women still need a 'special space' – observing that quite a few women were 'active' before the directorate was formed, but there was no mechanism to bring them together and ensure continuity (interview July 2005). The Women's Directorate was responsible for the implementation of the IMF education program, which involved a series of three-day programmes not only on gender but also on organizing, basic education, leadership and collective bargaining. The IMF provided between Rp.11 and Rp.12 million per programme but required FSPMI to pay about 10 per cent of costs. An important feature of the programme was IMF's requirement that women be tracked after attending trainings. Generally, there is little follow-up with training 'graduates' in Indonesian unions, and IMF felt that it was important that there be a higher level of continuity (interview with IMF project officer July 2005). The IMF-funded programme sought to address a number of challenges faced by women unionists in the community, the workplace and the union (Table 2.4).

Since the formation of the Women's Directorate, separate organizing structures have also been formed at lower levels in some parts of the Federation, such as the Batam branch of SPEE, where women account for 77 per cent of its 21,994 members. Of the branch's 21 workplace units, ten currently have women's departments. At the Federation's 2006 National Women's Conference – the theme of which was 'Women's Representation in Organizational Structures' – the Women's Department of the Batam branch announced that it planned to establish another six workplace-level women's departments in 2007 (Departemen Perempuan SPEE Batam 2006). Members of the Women's Directorate report that there have been significant increases in the number of women activists at the plant level since the Women's Directorate was formed and the IMF-sponsored programme began (interviews July 2005). This was borne out by

Table 2.4 Focus of the IMF-funded women's programme at FSPMI, 2004–6

Challenge	*Strategy*	*Indicator*
• Cultural barriers • Lack of support from family • Double burden • Poor view of activist women	• Gender training	• Rise in number of women who attend training
• Economic difficulties	• Financial planning training	• Not yet conducted
• Forced overtime • Long shifts	• Education about Manpower Law • Collective bargaining training	• Number of women who attend training/are active; number of female union members
• Extension of contract work	• Campaign about Manpower Law	• None specified
• Difficult to get leave to attend union activities • Women insufficiently active in union • Lack of self-confidence	• Education about Trade Union Law • Basic union education • One-day meetings • Leadership training • Creation of Women's departments/bureaus	• Number of women who attend training/are active • Number of women involved in training rose from 65 in 2003 to 197 in 2006 • Rise in nunber of women involved in leadership positions at the branch;[a] plan to introduce quota for central leadership positions. • Branch-level departments increased from 2 in 2003 to 9 in 2006
• Poor knowledge about benefits of unionism • Lack of initiative, unwillingness to be involved	• Campaign about basic labour rights and women workers' rights • One-day meetings	• Number of women union members and number of women involved in education programmes • Number of female union members rose by 2992 between 2003 and 2006
• Poor skills	• Leadership organizing and collective bargaining training	• None specified
• Discrimination	• Gender education • Campaign about basic labour rights and women workers' rights • Collective bargaining training	• Rise in number of women involved in leadership positions
• Male dominance within union	• Policy revision, budgetary provisions and quotas • Gender training	• None specified

Source: Adapted from Direktorat Perempuan FSPMI (2006b).

Note

a Percentage of branch leaders actually decreased between 2003 and 2006 (although the absolute number rose from eight to ten) and workplace unit level (the number rose from 77 to 135 and the percentage rose from 3.7 to 5.1).

focus group discussions with participants at a three-day collective bargaining course in July 2005 involving 21 people attended from 15 companies in Jakarta, Bogor, Tangerang, Depok and Karawang, the majority of whom were women. Some of the factories represented at the workshop had a number of women in key union positions. For example, three of the seven members of the executive at the Toshiba factory were women, one of whom was the local union branch head, while at Shinmu, another company represented at the workshop, nine of the ten union office-bearers were women. According to the Women's Directorate, there is also a 'very clear' difference in the number of women involved in collective bargaining procedures as a result of the trainings.

Women's Directorate staff also noted that the central leadership had become 'quite responsive', after initial difficulties convincing them that it was important for women to be involved in union activities and to be engaged in the running of the unions (interview July 2005). Observations during a follow-up visit in February 2006 suggested that although things had improved for women, they still faced entrenched resistance from the male union hierarchy, particularly with regard to their involvement in mainstream union structures. However, the Women's Directorate succeeded in lobbying the central executive to propose a change in the Federation's Constitution at its 2006 National Congress, which would set a 30 per cent quota for women in leadership positions (interview with general secretary of FSPMI October 2006). Although workplace unit delegations to the National Congress generally consist of the chair and secretary, for the 2006 Congress it was decreed that delegations of more than one person must include a woman. The 30 per cent quota, which was discussed at the FSPMI Women's Conference on 23–24 November 2006, was later raised at the SPEE Congress. Although the idea of a quota met with significant opposition, it was finally incorporated into the Constitution. However, no branch nominated a female candidate, forcing the committee to nominate four women to unspecified positions within the executive.

Conclusion

Many female union activists, particularly those who have been exposed to international gender programmes, feel that they are not accorded sufficient space or respect to participate fully in union life. Union structures are overwhelmingly male-dominated, and gender equality is not an issue that is taken seriously by very many of the men who hold positions of power in the Indonesian union movement. Equally, however, many women union activists feel that most of their female colleagues are not interested in engaging more fully in union activities, because of their commitments in their workplaces and to their families, and because of the clash between activist lifestyles and cultural expectations of what roles women should play, and the contexts in which those roles should be performed. The case of FSPMI demonstrates that separate organizing strategies can play an important role in overcoming some of these barriers and improving women's representation within union structures. Although separate organizing

has not yet succeeded in overcoming structural biases within the FSPMI-affiliated unions, let alone addressed the difficulties women face in the workplace or the wider community, separate structures have provided a space in which women can come together and develop the skills and strategies necessary to begin to tackle these problems even in this most male-dominated of unions.

Notes

1 In 2005, Indonesia's total labour force consisted of 105.8 million people, 94.9 million of whom were employed (Badan Pusat Statistik 2005). All macro-statistics presented in this chapter should be read as indicative, as data produced by Indonesian government departments are unreliable.

2 The industrial and labour force profiles in different regions of Indonesia vary considerably. Female labour force participation ranges from 31 per cent in Sulawesi to 57 per cent in the areas of Indonesia outside of Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan and Sulawesi. Similarly, females comprise only 28 per cent of all employed persons in Sulawesi, around 34 per cent in Sumatra, Java and Kalimantan and 41 per cent in the other islands of Indonesia (Depnakertrans 2003b). There are also significant differences in the distribution of the workforce between urban and rural areas. The service and industrial sectors account for 22 and 66 per cent, respectively, of women's jobs in urban centres, while in rural areas, 66 per cent of women are engaged in agriculture (Reerink 2006).

3 See Ford (2006b) for a discussion of these and other challenges faced by Indonesian unions.

4 For a chronology of Trimurti's public life, see Trimurti (1975).

5 In that same year, women accounted for 56 per cent of the membership of FSPMI's affiliate in the electronics sector, down from 64 per cent in 2001 (FSPMI 2004, 2005).

6 Many of the union meetings I have attended have lasted a number of days and have been held out of town or at least a significant distance from the workplace. The atmosphere of these meetings is often very male-dominated, with men sitting around smoking and joking and women choosing either to play along or to assume an ultra-feminine persona and distance themselves from their male counterparts.

7 It should be noted that many men are also reluctant to become involved in union activities in Indonesia. Scholars such as Athreya (1998) suggest that those married women who do decide to become engaged in labour activism are extremely committed. My own research confirms this.

8 I interviewed several women unionists and representatives of two international donors, including the American Centre for International Labour Solidarity (ACILS), the initiative's primary funding organization, about the role of the Women's Forum. Reerink, who has been closely involved with the Forum, has written extensively on it in her ILO report (Reerink 2006) and her doctoral dissertation (Reerink 2004).

9 Reerink (2006) notes that the Forum's members, who come from a mixture of unions affiliated with the KSPI and the KSBSI and a range of smaller unions and union federations, are largely drawn from the TCF sector but incorporates unionists from pharmaceuticals and health; metal and electronics; and the service sector; as well as women from chemical, seafarers' and construction unions.

10 Like many other union sector initiatives involving women, the Forum received significant external funding. The major donor was ACILS, who provided between Rp.150 million (US$16,000) and Rp.200 million (US$21,700) per year over four years (2000–4) for training and other activities. In addition, its 100 members pay dues of Rp.5,000 per month. Activities have been drastically reduced since the ACILS funding ceased, although core members continue to meet on a regular basis for dis-

cussions. Rudy Porter, then head of the ACILS Indonesia office, said that ACILS would have liked to continue its support but was unable to because its own funding has been dramatically curtailed since the split of its parent union, the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO) (interview July 2005).

11 When asked for concrete statistics on the number of women in leadership positions in unions, representatives of the Forum said they had no firm data (interviews July 2005).

12 Some women unionists are also opposed to the idea or the practices of the Forum. In the words of a one-time Forum participant

> I was involved, but I wasn't impressed, so I don't go anymore. The Forum isn't real – it doesn't work directly with members. It's more about politics, which is important, but not as important as the working at the grassroots. What's the point of a program that doesn't directly support the workers?
>
> (Interview July 2005)

13 FSPMI has the reputation of being one of the few large Indonesian unions that keeps extensive and reliable statistics on their membership. This has been confirmed both by the IMF and by my own visits to their office.

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3 China

Labour organizations representing women

Fang Lee Cooke

Despite the fact that significant progress has been achieved in gender equality in the last 50 years as a result of strong state intervention in China, both the development of the market economy and the ongoing restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have caused a setback in gender equality and a reduction in protection for women workers – most notably in wages, employment security and social insurance provision. In China, the state-controlled trade union, the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), is the official channel for worker's representation. Yet, the ACFTU is not the only body providing help for women workers: the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) has long been a patron in championing women's causes under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party. However, the presence of these two official organizations, which in principle offer representational mechanisms for women workers, does not necessarily mean that women workers in China are well organized and represented.

This chapter examines the employment patterns of women in China, the nature of union campaigns and struggles at the grass-roots level through an examination of the functions of the ACFTU and the ACWF at municipal level and the ACFTU in the workplace and finally workers' perceptions of union effectiveness at workplace level. It is based on fieldwork carried out in two districts in a medium-sized heavy industrial city in Guangdong Province, where many SOEs have been privatized or closed down.[1] This chapter examines the constraints the ACFTU and ACWF grass-roots organizations encounter in representing women workers and questions whether their work provides an effective mechanism for women's representation and participation within the workplace. In doing so, it partly challenges the existing literature on trade unionism in China, which has generally pointed to the inadequacy of trade unions and officials in protecting workers. This chapter argues that while this is indeed the case, some ACFTU representatives are attempting to address issues of importance to women workers, albeit within the particular focus of China's welfare-oriented unionism. Notably, where these efforts have failed, alternative forms of organizing – albeit very new and vulnerable – have started to emerge.

Women's employment in China

Since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has promoted gender equality through a succession of legislative and policy procedures which have enhanced women's political, economic and social position as well as their educational level and employment prospects (Cooke 2005). China has a high rate of employment for women and full-time employment tends to be the norm (Cooke 2001). Those who have part-time jobs, employed mainly in the informal sector, often need to work several jobs in order to earn an adequate wage (Cooke 2006b). As in many other countries, China's labour market is gender-segregated with women over-represented in education, health care, finance, wholesale, retail and catering (see Table 3.1) and under-represented in mining and construction and in governmental and Party organizations (Cooke 2003). While a growing number of Chinese women in urban areas are educated at similar levels to men and are also employed full-time, they are paid some 10–20 per cent less and at lower managerial and professional levels than their male counterparts (Cooke 2005).

Women's labour participation rate has experienced a decline since the 1990s. According to a survey carried out by the ACWF and the Ministry of Statistics at the end of 2000, 72 per cent of women between the age of 18 and 49 years in urban areas were in employment; 16.2 per cent lower than 1990 levels. This decrease is linked to the increasing proportion of women engaged in informal employment with low pay and low employment security, such as hourly and temporary work (Lu and Zhao 2002). Women have suffered from ongoing large-scale dismissals in the SOEs and collectively owned enterprises (COEs) since the mid-1990s, where a higher proportion of women than men were laid off (Zhang and Zhao 1999).[2] Retrenched workers have few prospects in the labour market where unskilled and semi-skilled workers are in abundant supply, and women workers tend to encounter more difficulties than men in regaining employment. The same survey carried out by the ACWF and the Ministry of Statistics also revealed that nearly 50 per cent of female workers retrenched from SOEs, but only about 30 per cent of retrenched men, believed that they had encountered gender and age discrimination in seeking reemployment (cited in Lu and Zhao 2002).

A parallel development has been the increasing number of rural migrant workers moving to urban areas since the late 1980s. As Saich (2001) observes, somewhere between 80 and 120 million rural migrant workers are transforming both rural and urban landscapes. Men mainly work on construction sites and in manufacturing plants while women tend to fill the vacancies in manufacturing plants, catering outlets and community services where sub-standard employment terms and conditions may be the norm and the level of state intervention is deliberately weak (Cooke 2005, 2006b). These are often jobs that urban workers are not willing to take: rural migrant workers now make up over 46 per cent of the workforce in the secondary and tertiary industrial sectors. In the catering and construction industries, rural labour consists of 70 and 80 per cent of the workforce, respectively.

Table 3.1 Proportion (%) of female employees by ownership and sector in urban units in China

Sector	*Total*		*State ownership*		*Collective ownership*		*Other ownership*	
	1995	*2004*	*1995*	*2004*	*1995*	*2004*	*1995*	*2004*
National total	38.6	38.1	36.1	37.0	44.6	37.5	48.3	40.4
Farming, forestry, animal husbandry, fisheries	37.6	37.0	37.8	37.2	31.9	30.5	37.2	36.1
Mining and quarrying	25.9	23.4	24.4	23.7	42.1	34.1	22.8	21.5
Manufacturing	45.2	43.6	40.9	36.0	53.1	46.2	49.7	46.0
Electricity, gas and water production & supply	31.4	31.0	31.5	31.3	32.1	31.6	28.8	30.1
Construction	19.4	15.4	20.7	18.4	17.8	15.3	14.2	13.1
Traffic, transport, storage and post	26.5	28.1	25.9	27.7	29.4	31.9	24.2	28.5
Wholesale, retail and catering[a]	46.3	44.3	44.9	40.1	47.5	42.2	56.4	50.5
		55.2		54.4		58.4		55.3
Finance	40.0	47.9	39.3	46.4	41.9	42.8	46.0	54.8
Real estate	33.7	33.7	34.1	35.1	33.2	33.7	31.9	32.7
Social welfare	44.1	48.1	43.0	47.8	55.1	51.7	59.0	48.0
Healthcare	56.9	59.7	58.1	60.4	49.7	53.8	57.8	60.8
Education	41.9	47.5	41.8	47.4	48.9	49.9	42.5	53.0
Culture and art	40.1	45.1	40.2	45.3	39.2	40.2	42.6	46.0
Governmental and party agencies, social organizations	22.6	26.7	22.5	26.6	35.0	38.6	30.0	51.3

Sources: The Ministry of Statistics China (1996: 101–2 2005: 20–4).

Notes

a Figures in 1995 were combined as one entry 'Wholesale, Retail and Catering' but separated in 2004 as entries under 'Wholesale and Retail' and 'Accommodation and Restaurants'.

Figures contained in this table include only urban workers and not rural migrant workers working in the urban units. Gender statistics on rural migrant workers working in urban industries are not available. However, it is known that the majority of workers in the construction industry are male rural migrant workers, while the majority of workers in the catering industry tend to be female rural migrant workers.

Organizing and representing women workers

For the last 55 years, the state has been the major force behind women's political participation and the pursuit of gender equality through a series of policy interventions and legislation (Korabik 1994; Wang 1999; Cooke 2001). Two national mass organizations, the ACWF and the ACFTU, form the institutional basis for the participation and representation of women workers at the local level. The fact that both organizations are led by the Communist Party (ACWF and ACFTU official statements) institutionalizes a master–subordinate relationship and delegitimizes any conflicts or power struggles with the state (White 1996). However, they do have some financial independence and some scope to work within private factories – although, as Murdoch and Gould (2004: 29) argue, even where they are interested in making change, they 'often do not have the skills or resources to do so'.

The tight grip of the Chinese state in political and social organizations means that the ACWF, which produces the bulk of the Chinese feminist theories, activities and research publications, is the only official women's organization at the national level in China (Judd 2002). As Judd (2002) argues, it is a very different type of organization from those in the west but is one that is equally as legitimate and as effective as women's movements elsewhere, given the constraints in China. Founded in 1949, the ACWF is a multi-tiered organization with local women's federations and group members at every divisional level of the government. The ACWF's monopoly position was institutionalized by regulations passed in 1998, which specify that 'identical or similar social groups cannot be set up within the same administrative area'.

The highest level of ACWF governance is the National Congress of Chinese Women, which convenes every five years to decide on the goals, guidelines and tasks of the National Women's Movement (ACWF website 2005). By the early 2000s, there were around 60,000 grass-roots branches of the ACWF above township and neighbourhood committee levels and more than 980,000 women's representatives and women's committees at grass-roots levels (ILO 2003). According to Article 6, Clause 25 of the 1983 Constitution of the ACWF, women's groups established within trade unions and a number of professional women's organizations also belong to the Federation (ILO 2003). In the late 1980s and the 1990s, defending women's equal employment rights has become a priority for the ACWF, and it played a fundamental role in blocking the 'women return home proposal' (Zheng 2000: 68), advanced by some (male) academics and economists. The ACWF contends that:

> Women's employment must be linked with women's liberation. Economics is the foundation. Without participation in social production, women would have no economic status. This [proposal] would [have] undermine[d] the equality between men and women in politics, society and [the] family.
>
> (Zheng 2000: 68)

The ACFTU, the only trade union recognized by the Chinese government, is the other major organization representing the rights and interests of women workers.

Trade unions in China play a fundamentally different role from their counterparts in the western economies. The Chinese trade unions are 'state instruments', carrying out a 'decisively subordinate role' that is 'concerned with *both* production and protection' (Martin 1989: 78). Although union officials are consulted on disciplinary and dismissal matters, they carry out this function effectively by acting as a 'conveyor belt' between the Communist Party and the workers (Hoffman 1981).[3] As a result, trade unions in China are considered ineffective in representing workers' interests against management prerogatives and, in some cases, engage in unlawful practices (see White 1996; Chan 1998; Howell 1998; O'Leary 1998; Cooke 2002; Ding *et al.* 2002; Clarke 2005).

Women unionists have adopted the strategy of separate organizing, establishing women's departments within the ACFTU. Under the Trade Union Law (amended in 2001), the official role of the ACFTU in supporting women workers includes participating in the formulation of laws and regulations related to women workers' rights and interests and monitoring their implementation, helping retrenched women gain employment by providing them with skills training to improve their employability and strengthening labour protection for women to defend their special interests. In 1991, the ACFTU's Women Workers' Department (WWD) was established in order to accentuate the importance of protection for women workers and to facilitate its work in this area, and by the end of 1996 all provincial federations of trade unions had set up a WWD. In 1997, 1,954 women officials held positions at chair and vice-chair levels in ACFTU units. In 2000, there were over 85,000 full-time female trade union officials (Xu 2000), comprising some 18 per cent of the total union officials (see Table 3.2). By the end of 2003, 463,000 women workers' committees had been established in trade unions at all levels (Fan 2005). More generally, in organizations where a trade union unit is established, women's union membership level is high (see Table 3.2), although it must be noted that the high level of membership in workplaces is not necessarily an indication of union strength, as

Table 3.2 Union membership in unionized workplaces in China

Year	*Number of employees ('000)*	*Number of female employees ('000)*	*Number of grassroots unions ('000)*	*Membership density (%)*	*Membership ('000)*	*Number of female members ('000)*
1980	74,482	25,186	376	82.1	61,165	–
1985	96,430	35,967	465	88.4	85,258	31,492
1990	111,569	42,910	606	90.8	101,356	38,977
1995	113,214	45,153	593	91.9	103,996	41,165
2000	114,721	45,345	859	90.3	103,615	39,173
2004	144,367	55,026	1,020	94.9	136,949	51,353

Source: Adapted from The Ministry of Statistics China (2005: 777).

once a trade union unit is established in a company, employees are strongly encouraged to become members.

There has been some cooperation between the ACWF and the ACFTU at the central level. As Zheng (2000: 69) notes, the ACWF and the ACFTU's Women's Department 'devoted much effort to retraining, referral, and reemployment' during the waves of retrenchments in the late 1990s. The two organizations have also joined forces to conduct or commission surveys and reports on a range of issues concerning women's employment and 'to press for government action to guarantee women's employment rights, and to establish social security and unemployment benefits to buffer the impact of institutional and industrial transformations' (Zheng 2000: 69–70).

Branch-level activities in the ACWF and ACFTU

ACWF and ACFTU branches are under the dual control of each level's local government and higher levels of their own organization, potentially compromising their organizational autonomy. For example, ACWF and ACFTU offices at the district level are located in the same building as the government departments of the same district government, and according to the interviewees, the ACWF and ACFTU branches are often mistaken as government departments. Some ACWF and ACFTU officials have worked in a number of government departments prior to working in their current post, and ACWF and ACFTU officials at local government level are managed in similar ways to civil servants as prescribed under the Civil Servants Law. Perhaps most importantly, all the trade union officials at branch level are appointed by the local government of the same level, despite legal provisions that trade union committees be democratically elected.

These characteristics clearly have implications for the independence of these organizations and their ability to represent the interests of workers. The most important grass-roots function of the ACFTU, according to the ACFTU municipal chair, is to maintain the stability of society – which means they perform a 'policing' role such as diverting the crowds at demonstrations. A second important role is the protection of workers' employment rights (interview with the ACFTU municipal branch chair December 2005). However, at the municipal level, the ACFTU performs several major functions. These include promoting employees' participation in technological innovation at workplaces, establishing trade union units in private enterprises, poverty relief, monitoring and facilitating the setting up of social insurance schemes and skills training. The major roles of ACWF and ACFTU officials at the district branch level, determined at the provincial and municipal level, are as follows (see Table 3.3).

In addition to these functions, officials from both ACFTU and ACWF branches report that they have had to deal with many other issues. 'Our trade union officials now work any time and whenever there is a call for help. They can all be contacted by mobiles' (interview with the ACFTU municipal branch chair December 2005). This is in part because of the increasing performance

Table 3.3 Summary of major functions of ACWF and ACFTU branches

Organization	*Functions*
ACWF	• Legal support – to organize and manage professional legal aid to women workers, to inform women of their rights and to assist them in using the legal system • Training on legal knowledge – to help standardize the process of legal-aid services and improve the capacity of the ACWF branches at lower levels to handle relevant legal-aid cases • Emergency relief fund – for women whose families are in extreme financial difficulties • Information dissemination – producing and distributing information covering women's basic rights • Organizing legal knowledge fairs/events – collaborating with other governmental departments to host public events at various administrative levels • Capacity building – organizing (for officials at the lower levels) and participating in training and development programmes
ACFTU	• (Re)training and assisting retrenched workers for re-employment • Occupational health and safety training for employees in private enterprises • Liaising with the legal-aid department to offer free legal support • Counselling fairs • Campaigning to improve working conditions in private enterprises • Monitoring work-related injury prevention system and protecting legal rights on work injury • Providing medical aid for workers • Emergency relief fund – for women workers whose family is in extreme financial difficulties • Information dissemination – producing and distributing information covering women's basic rights • Establishing trade unions in private enterprises • Organizing legal knowledge fairs/events – collaborating with other governmental departments to host public events at various administrative levels • Capacity building – organizing (for officials at the lower levels) and participating in training and development programmes

pressure from above and in part because of the threat of redundancy that the officials face. The ACFTU municipal branch has eight departments and 29 full-time union officials, over half of whom are women. Their primary sources of funding include the municipal government, other government organizations and a levy of 40 per cent of the trade union membership fees from enterprises. Resource levels are significantly lower at the municipal district level, where funding comes from similar sources but at a much smaller scale. As Table 3.2 shows, the number of full-time union officials has declined since the mid-1990s as a result of the lay-offs in government departments and large organizations. In addition, officials reported difficulties in collecting the levy from their subordinate branches and enterprises on time because they too are subject to financial con-

straints. In such a climate, women's issues are not a high priority. For example, although the ACFTU's Women Workers Committee released two important documents in 2004 seeking to develop a group of high-quality women workers who will contribute to the social and economic development of the country (*Asian Labour News* 2005), trade union officials reported that they have no resources (financial or staff) to pursue such projects.

The ACFTU has nevertheless developed a number of new initiatives which do benefit women at the municipal level. One is the introduction of a low-cost medical care scheme for workers in financial difficulty which subsidizes medical care for registered workers at local hospitals. A second medical care scheme involves insurance cooperatives which, amongst other functions, covers over 80,000 women workers for women-related health problems including breast cancer. Further initiatives include the provision of cheap housing to women workers in extreme hardship, particularly single mothers. Funding is limited and comes from union coffers or from a small budget allocated by the government and so this programme is only available to a small number of families. These initiatives mainly target urban women workers, particularly those from the SOEs and COEs, which the ACFTU has identified as a priority.

The level of cooperation between the ACWF and the ACFTU varies at the municipal level. In District West, there was a close working relationship between the ACWF and the ACFTU offices. The male ACFTU chair was happy for the ACWF office to take on some of the work related to women workers because he felt that sometimes it is 'more convenient and appropriate' for a woman official to deal with women's issues. However, the same level of collaboration between the two offices and the involvement of ACWF in women workers' issues was not found in District East. While officials were reluctant to expand on the reasons for the lack of collaboration, they both appeared to be less enthusiastic about their work than their counterparts in District West. Similarly, not all government departments are willing to cooperate with the ACWF and ACFTU. The deputy human resources (HR) manager in District West and the director of External Affairs in District East considered the trade union to be irrelevant to their organizations' function (interviews December 2005). Some officials questioned the need for a union at all:

> We are all employed and paid directly by the Party. Would the trade union officials dare argue against their employer? Would they dare represent us if we really have any grievance against the Party? I don't believe they have the courage to confront the Party. So trade union representation is just empty talk in our organization, even though we have set up a trade union here.
>
> (Interview with director, District East External Affairs Department, December 2005)

The ACFTU's status as an instrument of government is reflected particularly strongly in its lack of emphasis on activities at the workplace level. There is

relatively little contact between workplace union representatives and union officials at district branch level, other than when the district branch wishes to disseminate a new policy. ACFTU officials of both municipal district branches admitted that they had no time to establish relationships with union officials and representatives at workplaces, to consolidate union strengths and to develop activities to maximize their resource and impact:

> We are just too busy to network with them. They are not our priority. We only make contact with them if and when they ask for help. In dealing with enterprises, our priority would be those that have not set up a trade union yet and they are not easy to break into.
>
> (Interview with the ACFTU chair, District East, December 2005)

Workplace activities of the ACFTU

Not surprisingly, then, the union provides few activities and events specifically for women workers in the workplace. According to a survey jointly conducted by the ACFTU Women Workers' Department of Fujian Province and Fujian Normal University (cited in *Workers' Daily* October 2004), workers felt that union officials had a relatively low level of competence and were mostly concerned with coping with their increasing workload rather than dealing with women's problems. Seventy per cent of the 1,100 women workers surveyed desired emotional support. A large majority of women, particularly single mothers, felt that giving them gifts such as money, clothes or other forms of sustenance had limited impact for solving their problems; instead, women workers indicated they really wanted moral support in the form of counselling and advice. In practice, as the case studies of two Guangdong hospitals that follow indicate, union activities, and the degree to which they focus on women, also vary considerably between workplaces.

District East Hospital employs 82 employees, 54 of whom are women. The hospital is relatively small compared with the two major municipal hospitals in the city and has suffered intense competition from other hospitals. In 1997, the hospital was rebuilt on the existing site and invested in updating its medical equipment, but the need to repay the loans has meant there is little money available for paying staff bonuses and allowances. This has been a major source of complaint from staff and prevented the hospital from attracting and retaining talented staff. Staff at this hospital on average earn only about 50 per cent of the income earned by staff in the nearby municipal hospital. Financial constraints have meant there has been little trade union activity in the hospital in the last ten years, where the ACFTU has no independent presence. The vice-president of the hospital is responsible for both personnel and trade union issues in addition to controlling hospital finances (interview December 2005). It is often the case in China that senior managers also act as chair of the union (Chan 1998), which, as will be seen below, has significant implications for the independence of workers' representation.

In the case of this hospital, 'trade union activity' means social events and entertainment including parties, short holiday breaks and sporting and art competitions. In SOEs, which are mostly unionized, these are typical union activities. It is seen as necessary to appoint female representatives in a workplace like this hospital, where a high proportion of women are employed. This is not because female representatives are better positioned to voice women's concerns and specific interests, but because it enables male managers to avoid direct involvement in managing women workers on issues that are deemed gender-sensitive due to Chinese taboos about interactions between the sexes. The vice-president of the hospital felt that it is more 'convenient' and 'appropriate' for women's issues to be dealt with by a person of the same gender in order to avoid any embarrassment from both sides and to protect himself from the risk of being accused of sexual harassment. In addition, women are considered to be more capable in carrying out the welfare role and tasks of 'feminine' nature. There are three women union representatives (two nurses and one doctor) in the hospital, whose union tasks include visiting female workers' homes when they are absent on sick leave or maternity leave or facing family problems. The union representatives interviewed reported that these are unpleasant tasks but someone needs to do them:

> We are there to maintain morale of the workforce by showing our staff the warmth of the organization when they and their family need help and by making sure conflicts at work are resolved in order to create a good working atmosphere for the staff.
>
> (Interview with female union representative December 2005)

In performing these roles, the union representatives are in effect fulfilling managerial functions (Verma and Yan 1995; Cooke 2005), not representing women workers.

Mining Town Hospital, located in a mining town in District East, is at the point of shutting down due to the forced closure of the mines. The mine closure has led to the collapse of the local economy as the majority of the miners were rural migrant workers who, with their families, have moved elsewhere to seek employment. Mining Town Hospital has been transformed from a prosperous hospital into one that is struggling to pay wages. After radical downsizing, the hospital currently has 67 employees, with women comprising over 70 per cent of the workforce and 100 per cent of nursing staff. Like District East Hospital, it has three female union representatives. One of them (a nurse by training) is in a full-time managerial role, in charge of personnel administration issues as well as trade union functions. The trade union branch in this hospital plays a similar role to that of District East Hospital, visiting the poor and the sick and organizing employee welfare at work. Despite more serious financial constraints, the union has managed to maintain a good level of social events and entertainment activities to boost the morale of the workforce. The union in this hospital also provides counselling to those selected for redundancy and organizes annual free

health check-ups for female employees. Since the hospital is a major organization in Mining Town, it is eager to portray its good social image by participating in community events and charity activities and the union of the hospital usually attends these activities on behalf of the hospital. Union members also donated their own money to build a kiosk as a community project in the name of the hospital union (interview with Mining Town Hospital trade union official December 2005).

Inadequate representation

As these case studies show, both the ACWF and the ACFTU provide support and services for women workers in need. However, resource constraints make it very difficult for officials to complete the tasks set by their state employer. As the ACFTU chair of District East summarized, 'We all have big titles but no soldiers, no money, no authority and no power. We are expected to provide employment for the laid-off workers, but the jobs are just simply not there' (interview with the ACFTU municipal branch chair December 2005). Consequently, ACFTU and ACWF officials at municipal and district levels make pragmatic decisions on their strategies and priorities with regard to women workers' interests governed by resource constraints and instructions from higher authorities. It is clear, however, that the ACFTU's work is largely in the form of organizing from a distance rather than in the workplace and concerned with resolving issues on an individual basis, not organizing for collective rights.

These practices are reflected in female workers' perceptions of the union, as demonstrated by the preliminary findings of a survey of 494 women workers in the city. When asked which is the most effective body in resolving their problems at work, 9 per cent of all 494 respondents nominated the trade union, 5 per cent chose the ACWF, 17 per cent chose the labour authority, 6 per cent chose other government bodies, 39 per cent replied they did not know and 21 per cent believed none of these are effective. Sixty-four per cent of the 305 respondents employed in unionized workplaces surveyed believed that the trade union's function is to play a welfare role including organizing social events. Less than 12 per cent believed that the union's role involves negotiation of terms and conditions with the employer, and just 21 per cent believed that the union will represent workers when there is a dispute with the company. Less than 20 per cent of these same workers said that they would go to their union for help, even though 47 per cent of them felt that their wages were too low; 20 per cent felt that their working hours were too long; 30 per cent felt the threat of job insecurity; and over 35 per cent experienced work-related stress. Nearly 40 per cent of all 494 respondents felt that the trade union has no power to solve any problems at the workplace and 58 per cent believed that the trade union is not very effective or not effective at all in representing their interests and labour rights. One-third of all 494 respondents did not know what their company's attitude was towards the trade union, whilst 23 per cent reported that they had never talked about the trade union at work. However, nearly one-quarter of all respondents

felt that there were issues that are women-specific at their workplace, such as discrimination, which should receive more attention from the trade union.

Alternative means of organizing

The inadequacy of Chinese trade unions and other official bodies in defending workers' rights has led to a reliance on a number of alternative avenues, both official and unofficial and formal and informal, through which workers can voice their grievances and resolve their disputes with employers. These include official labour dispute settlement channels including mediation, arbitration and litigation (see Taylor *et al.* 2003); letters and petitions (see Thireau and Hua 2003); and workplace industrial actions, protests and street demonstrations which are often spontaneous and illegal (Lee 1999, 2000; Chan 2001; Chen 2003, 2006; Gallagher 2005). Since the 1990s, labour relations in China have undergone significant changes, resulting in a continuously sharp rise in the number of cases and persons involved in labour disputes (see Cooke forthcoming). In the 13 years between 1992 and 2004, the number of cases dealt with by the arbitration committees grew nearly 32 times from 8,150 to 260,471 (The Ministry of Statistics China 1993, 2005). Some 95 per cent of these cases were brought to the committees by workers. Pay, social insurance and welfare, alteration or termination of employment contracts, and work injury/labour protection were the major causes for the disputes. In addition, the average number of persons involved in the collective cases exceeded the minimum number of three, with at least 29 persons involved in each year since 1994. These official statistics only reveal the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the state of labour discontent in China in recent decades, suggesting that collective disputes remain a key feature in the labour arena in China (Cooke 2008). While the breakdown of statistics by gender is not available, it is reasonable to suggest that a large proportion of the workers involved are female, as they tend to be clustered in low-paid jobs and a higher proportion of women than men have been retrenched by the SOEs.

A variety of informal mechanisms have developed to provide support and allow workers to let off steam on a day-to-day basis. Eight informants reported that some sort of network has been formed among a few close colleagues in order to communicate work-related information, to comfort each other when they experience difficulties with management or when they encounter personal problems. Some of these networks also organize their own social events, normally part of the trade union's function at the workplace. The informants felt that these social occasions are needed not only to enrich their social lives, but more importantly to provide a valuable peer support mechanism where they can vent their grievances. As one informant said 'Nobody [management and official bodies] cares about us. We have to organize our own circle to help each other to get through our difficulties .... It also gives us something to look forward to' (interview December 2005). The self-organizing strategies revealed by these informants are passive and ad hoc and do not directly challenge management or

authority. These activities may help them to cope better with injustice at work, but it is unclear at this stage whether they will raise collective consciousness or mobilize other workers.

Since the 1990s, there have also been attempts by women and migrant workers whose needs are not being met by official unions to establish autonomous organizations. However, these initiatives were quickly suppressed by the Chinese government (*China Labour Bulletin* 2005). More successful have been the efforts of a growing number of Chinese and international NGOs to provide support for women workers (Murdoch and Gould 2004: 35–61), primarily in large industrially developed cities and along the east coast area of China, often in collaboration with well-known western multinational firms. One of these is the Chinese Women Workers Network (CWWN). Founded in 1996, CWWN is a grass-roots organization for migrant women factory workers based in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province (Ngai and Yang 2004), which covers Hong Kong and the Special Economic Zone of Guangdong Province. Its activities focus on labour rights, gender awareness, occupational health and safety and economic cooperative projects (Murdoch and Gould 2004: 45–6; Ngai and Yang 2004). The organization adopts a community-organizing model but is also moving towards organizing branches within factories (Ngai and Yang 2004). To date, this kind of initiative has a tenuous hold in China and reaches only a tiny number of women workers; although these NGOs operate in close proximity to some ACFTU and ACWF branches, they have neither established alliances nor conducted cooperative actions with those organizations.

Conclusion

Given the vast differences in political ideology, union structure and agenda, the profiles of women's employment and union membership and the cultural norms under which union representatives operate, the substance of – and approach to – women organizing in China is significantly different from that in western countries. Two of the obstacles to women's unionism cited in the literature on western countries are the proportion of working women who are union members compared with men and the under-representation of women on union committees. This is not the case in China where women workers' union membership level is only marginally lower than that of men. In addition, a relatively large proportion of trade union officials are women since the union's role has traditionally been seen as a welfare role to which women are considered better suited than men. The Trade Union Law (2001) also stipulates the presence of women representatives; however, it must be noted that equality in quantity does not necessarily lead to the same equality in power or parity in women's working and social lives (Cooke 2006a).

This chapter has provided an overview of the routes of formal representation of women workers in China at the municipal, district and workplace level, showing that ACWF and ACFTU officials at municipal and district levels are

attempting to support women workers, albeit by providing social services rather than by organizing them. The case studies presented here demonstrate how the dual and contradictory roles of workers' representation and the implementation of state policy are manifested in the pragmatic and gradualist approach adopted by ACFTU and ACWF officials. This approach does not address the two fundamental constraints faced by Chinese women – 'inaccessibility to the leadership structure and the persistence of cultural norms on gender roles' (Wang 1999: 39). The suppression of attempts to form independent associations outside the ACFTU and ACWF means that the nature, process and substance of women's representation continue to be largely determined by the Party and that there is little scope for women activists to champion women's causes outside these state institutions. The ineffectiveness of the ACFTU and ACWF in organizing and representing Chinese women workers' interests has led to the growth of a number of alternative routes for women to voice their grievances, often as part of a wider labour discontent.

Notes

1 Fieldwork was conducted in a medium-sized heavy industrial city in Guangdong Province in southeast China where many SOEs have been privatized or closed down. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese and in the workplace of the interviewees. A total of nine officials were interviewed at the municipal and municipal district level. In addition, three hospital presidents and four female union representatives were interviewed in two state-owned hospitals (District East Hospital and Mining Town Hospital). Twelve women workers were also interviewed. Hospitals were chosen because of the very high percentage of female workers (nearly 60 per cent) employed in the health care sector. In addition to these interviews, this chapter draws on the preliminary findings of a questionnaire survey conducted during November 2005 and February 2006 on women workers' perceptions of trade union effectiveness.
2 Similar waves of dismissals have taken place in the public sector and governmental organizations (Cooke 2005), although the scale has been much smaller and with less damaging effect to the retrenched employees.
3 See You (1998) for a more detailed review of the earlier political debate within the Party in the 1950s on the role of ACFTU and Sheehan (1999) for a historical overview of the role of the trade unions in brokering the party–worker relationship.

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4 Malaysia

Women, labour activism and unions

Vicki Crinis

Women's union activism in Malaysia has received very little attention. Women have engaged in strikes and other organized forms of labour protest, reported workplace injustices and participated in a variety of labour movement activities such as Labour Day celebrations and public meetings on labour policy. However, these protests and events are rarely reported. Despite their record of public action, women's activism has been overshadowed by the focus on male workers issues and by the paucity of women in leadership roles. This chapter examines the role of women in Malaysian unions since the 1970s. It concentrates on the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) and its private sector union affiliates and on non-government organizations (NGOs) that have played an active part in organizing women workers. It is based on data collected in interviews with leaders of the MTUC and the MTUC Women's Committee and with union leaders of the National Union of Plantation Workers, the Nurses Union and the Textile and Garment Workers Union in Johor, Penang and Selangor. The interviews, conducted in 2005 and 2006, build on earlier interviews with the same or former leaders of these unions and *Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor* (Friends of Women Selangor), a women's NGO, working in several industrial zones on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

This chapter argues that separate organizing has not successfully advanced the cause of women workers. A women's committee was established in the MTUC in 1965, but government restrictions on union organizing have made it difficult for unions to raise the numbers of female trade union leaders and members thus limiting the committee's effectiveness. However, these restrictions are not the most significant barrier to women's participation in the union movement. Other forms of feminist civil society activism are quite strong in Malaysia, and female unionists have devised strategies with NGOs to campaign for women's rights within the workplace and the home. However, the masculine culture of trade unions, and male unionists, along with continued emphasis on women's role in the family limit women's engagement with the union movement.

This chapter addresses a major question raised by the literature on women's participation in trade unions, namely why women join unions in the first place. Gill Kirton (2005: 386) has examined the factors that influence women's

decisions to join and participate in unions, arguing that women do not seek to become union members even if they have a family background of unionism and that they require encouragement from local male and female union leaders, women-only training and a critical mass of union supportive members at the workplace. Similarly, Jane Parker's (2003) work reinforced the idea that women unionists need women-only groups within a union so that they can be educated without being overwhelmed by the overbearing power of male trade unionists. However, the Malaysian case indicates that – in Malaysia at least – while women's committees can ameliorate some of the structural deficiencies of unions, they have not changed the sexual politics in unionism.

Trade union organizing and government restrictions

Women's poor representation in contemporary unions is a direct result of the way unionism developed in Malaysia and of the legislative framework set out under first the colonial administration and then the Malaysian government. Labour legislation was first enacted to regulate the employment of the largely male Chinese and Indian immigrant workforce in mines and on plantations in the colonial period. At this time, the numbers of Chinese and Malay women employed in the mines were very low. However, larger numbers of female Indian workers were employed on the rubber plantations, where they worked as unskilled labourers as part of family labour units. Along with male workers, some of the Indian women employed on the rubber plantations and in rubber factory production sections engaged in protests for higher wages and improved working conditions (Ariffin 1988). However, labour laws were introduced to regulate labour unrest in these industries in the 1940s, and women activists were sidelined when unions were established based around trades and skilled male workers under laws passed in 1948 (Ayadurai 1993: 63).

Trade unionism was expanded and unions were further regulated after independence was achieved in 1957 when the government introduced the Trades Union Act in 1959. In 1967, collective bargaining was formalized and arbitration introduced under the Industrial Relations Act. After the Race Riots in 1969 and the Malaysian Airlines Strike in 1983, both Acts were amended to increase government power in the arbitration system, to limit the freedom of trade unions in Malaysia, to weaken trade union power in the export sector and to prevent strike action in essential industries (Kaur 2004: 200). As is discussed below, the amendments to these Acts effectively curtailed union power in the feminized export sector industries. In the 1960s, women made up about 25 per cent of all union members, but very few women held office in the male-dominated unions, including those with a primarily female membership such as the National Union of Plantation Workers and the state textile unions. The dearth of women office bearers was also evident in the MTUC and public sector unions affiliated to Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS) Sector (Ariffin 1989: 87). In terms of the ethnic composition, union leadership during this period was dominated by Indian and Chinese Malaysians (Todd and Bhopal 2002).

Government restrictions on union organizing had a significant impact on the numbers of women who joined unions in the manufacturing industries. These restrictions can be contextualized in the wider history of industrialization and development in Malaysia. In the 1970s, the government introduced its New Economic Policy (NEP) with the aim of shifting from import substitution to export-oriented industrialization and alleviating poverty by improving the economic standing of the Malays (see Kaur 2004). The NEP had important implications for the composition of the industrial labour force. The growth and structural changes that took place in the economy during the 1971–97 period required a large number of workers (Jomo and Todd 1994: 78; Malaysian Government Publication 1998). Total employment in Malaysia grew from 2.1 million in 1957 to 4.2 million in 1975, to 6.1 million in 1988 and to 8.6 million in 1999. Given that the NEPs were put in place to benefit the Malays over other ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese, changes in Malay labour force participation during this period are significant. In 1957, Malay employment accounted for approximately 16.7 per cent of the total workforce. By 1970, the figure had risen to 34.2 per cent and by 1990 to 48.5 per cent (Malaysian Government Publication 1998: 104).

Large numbers of women, especially Malay women, entered the workforce for the first time under the NEP. In the years between 1975 and 2000, the number of women in paid employment increased from 37 to 44.5 per cent (Malaysian Government 2006). As the government sought to persuade manufacturers to provide work for unemployed females from the towns and *kampong* (villages) and recruited young Malay women from rural areas, thousands of females moved to areas near the free-trade zones and worked for subsidiaries of multinational companies. By the late 1970s, some 80,000 *kampong* girls between the ages of 16 and 24 years had entered the electronics factories (Ong 1995: 171). Overall, the percentage of Malay women working in manufacturing industries rose from 4.3 per cent in 1957 to 24 per cent in 1990 (Yahya cited in Caspersz 1998: 258), resulting in the growth of a proletarianized Malay workforce. This increase affected the composition of union membership. As more Malays moved into the workforce, Malay trade union members rose from 21 per cent in 1960 to 50 per cent in 1980 and to over 70 per cent by 2000 (Todd and Bhopal 2002: 73). Increasing numbers of middle-class Malay women also joined trade unions in the white-collar sectors of the workforce as a result of the NEP (Todd and Bhopal 2002: 86). These women activists lobbied for women's rights through political channels as well as contesting wages and labour conditions through the trade union. Through these efforts, they achieved some good results on issues such as equal pay, maternity and retirement benefits (Gallaway and Hagan 1997; Crinis 2003).

Freedom for working-class women employed in secondary manufacturing to join trade unions was limited by government agreements that guaranteed special privileges to multinational companies in the newly established export processing zones (EPZs). Women workers in these industries were denied the right to form a trade union. Government restrictions on national union organizing, membership and strike action were introduced under the Industrial Relations Act in 1967

to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) in newly established export-oriented industries (Kaur 2004: 249). As a result of this policy, women workers in the electronics industry, especially workers in electronics factories in EPZs, have not had the opportunity to unionize.[1] Although some workers in the electronic factories have formed in-house unions, these were inspired by the government's 'Look East' policy based on Asian values rather than on the welfare state values of the West which underpin national-level unions (Wad 1998). Meanwhile, attempts by electronics workers to form a national trade union have continually been rejected by the Registrar of Trade Unions. In 1988, unions and workers attempted to force the government to allow electronic workers to join a union, but threats from the big US companies to leave Malaysia prevented the legislation from being passed (Jomo and Todd 1994). Ten years later, the electrical workers union succeeded in organizing workers in three companies in Penang (Kelly 2002: 395). In 2006, electronics workers made another attempt to register a trade union with the Registrar of Trade Unions, with little success.[2]

On the inside: women's involvement in unions

When it comes to joining unions, women unionists in Malaysia are faced with similar challenges as their Western counterparts (Pocock 1997; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Parker 2003; Kirton 2005). Raising union officials' awareness about the problems faced by women remains a key challenge for the achievement of gender equality within unions. Women's situation is complicated by the fact that the union movement is, as Suzanne Franzway (2000) has argued, a 'greedy institution' that requires female unionists to have high levels of commitment and loyalty. Accordingly, women unionists have to balance commitment, workload and emotional labour in the workplace as well as family commitments at home. In Malaysia, the responsibility for housework and childcare is still largely borne by women. Working-class women do not have the means to pay for domestic help and so have to do the housework as well as earn a living. They have little time to attend trade union meetings, which are generally held after work hours when women have to care for their families.

In 2004, there were 609 trade unions in the public and private sectors, representing 8.5 per cent of Malaysia's total workforce of 10.5 million. In the private sector, there were 269 trade unions affiliated to the MTUC with a total of 517,112 members – 288,528 of whom were male and 216,298 of whom were female. Female workers comprise more than 50 per cent of workers in 35 of the 269 private sector unions. With the exception of plantation workers, unions with a female majority tend to be in feminized sectors such as banking, healthcare and education (Table 4.1). Male union members make up the majority of workers in the other 234 unions which are mostly located in industries and occupations that are traditionally considered male domains. In total, 45 per cent of MTUC members – but only 7 per cent of union leaders – are women.

Since the 1990s, large numbers of foreign workers have joined Malaysian female workers in the manufacturing industries, making it even more difficult

Table 4.1 Unions with largest proportion of female workers, 2004

Name of Union	*Membership*	*Male*	*Female*
Amalgamated Union of Employees in Government Clerical	7,011	2,967	4,044
Electrical Industry Workers Union	28,116	14,958	13,158
Selangor and Federal Territory Textile Workers Union	538	242	296
Employee Provident Fund Board Staff Union	2,488	1,168	1,320
Union of Employees in Private Medical Health Services	1,633	175	1,458
Johor Textile and Garment Workers	2,596	620	1,976
Malayan Nurses Union	13,341	–	13,341
National Union of Plantation Workers	39,402	18,787	20,615
National Union of the Teaching Profession	113,019	40,246	72,773
University Hospital Staff Union	1,796	714	1,082
Union of Employees in Trade Unions	131	64	67
University of Malaya General Staff Union	1,477	750	727
Negeri Sembilan/Malaka Textile and Garment Workers Union	518	112	406
Sabah Medical Services Union	4,212	986	3,226
Association of Bank Officers Malaysia	2,758	1,218	1,540
KPP Harris Advanced Technology	304	55	249
Kesatuan Pekerja2 Acrylic Textiles of Malaysia	190	52	138
Kesatuan Kakitangan Koperasi Kebangsaan	209	77	132
Kesatuan Pekerja2 Pekeranian Pos Malaysia	3,597	1,831	1,766
Kesatuan Kakitagan Percetaan Keselematan Nasional	182	70	112
National Union of Bank Employees	24,046	10,186	13,860
Sabah Bank Employees Union	1,660	698	962
Sarawak Bank Employees Union	2,746	1,124	1,618
Kesatuan Pekerja2 Kian Joo	525	140	385
Association of Maybank Employees	1,151	527	624
Association of Hong Kong Bank Officers	466	214	252
Association of Maybank Class One Officers	8,358	4,007	4,351
Kesatuan Kakitangan Akademik Taylor's College	135	30	105
Kesatuan Kakitangan Pertubuhan Keselamatan Sosial	746	280	466
Kesatuan Pegawai2 Pentadbiran Industri Insurans	533	131	402
Kesatuan Pekerja2 Hitachi Consumer	960	148	812
KesatuanKakitangan Bank Simpanan Nasional	2,861	1,143	1,718
Sabah Indland Revenue Employees Union	399	176	223
Kesatuan Pekerja2 Epsom Precision (M)	268	49	219
Kesatuan Pekerja2 Felda Rubber Products	442	112	330

Source: Compiled from a list of MTUC Affiliates provided by the MTUC.

for unions to organize women workers. Immigration data indicate that in 2004, the number of foreign workers had reached 1.3 million or 12 per cent of the workforce. The manufacturing sector, especially the garment and textile industry, is heavily dependent on this foreign labour and employs a large number of women. In manufacturing, foreign workers account for 30.5 per cent of the workforce (Ministry of Finance 2006). Under industrial relations law, foreign workers are legally permitted to join a trade union, but they are subject to visa restrictions which limit their right to join associations. Many employers also specify in their contracts that foreign workers are not allowed to join a trade union (*New Straits Times* 26 May 1997). The MTUC has argued that once foreign workers are employed, they should be accorded the same rights, wages and benefits as Malaysian workers. In response, the government accused the MTUC of trying to bolster the amount of fees collected from workers to strengthen its financial standing (*New Straits Times* 26 May 1997). The MTUC has responded to the migrant worker issue with support from the International Labour Organization (ILO) by meeting with unions and NGOs from the countries that supply foreign workers to Malaysia. However, according to the MTUC, the meeting was a waste of resources because the people attending the meeting were not decision-makers – as a result nothing has changed. Overall, most migrant workers arriving in Malaysia have little knowledge of labour laws or their rights to organize, and in many, if not most, factories in most states, no unions exist for them to join.

Engagement in the MTUC

The MTUC Women's Committee was established in 1965 to represent women in the affiliated trade unions to put women's issues on the table and to train women workers in trade union strategies and practices (MTUC 1999). The MTUC Women's Committee focuses on encouraging women's participation in trade union activities, liaising with NGOs and women-friendly organizations to push for improved maternity allowance benefits, and lobbying for better legal protection for women workers. The Women's Committee conducts their own training programmes when funds are available and has had some success, increasing women's awareness of trade unions through education programmes within the labour movement itself. Efforts have also been made to improve women's representation within union structures. Although the MTUC and its affiliated unions continue to be dominated by men, a number of women have become leaders of their unions and vice-presidents in the MTUC and in some affiliates. In the banking sector for example, 80 per cent of leadership roles are filled by women (MTUC, interview with an MTUC Education Officer April–May 2006).

In 2001, the MTUC adopted a policy of encouraging women's participation in all MTUC programmes and activities, with the hope that this policy would trickle down to all affiliates. However, implementation of this policy is difficult even within the MTUC itself. The MTUC Working Committee is comprised of the principal office bearers, namely the president, deputy president, secretary

general, deputy secretary general, secretary, deputy finance secretary and 11 vice-presidents. In 2006, women held none of the key posts, and only three of the 11 vice-presidents were female.[3] The MTUC has employed all sorts of strategies to help women overcome the difficulties they face within the unions, but male unionists do not question the masculine culture of unions which construct women as the 'problem'. As the discourses of women and work illustrated in the following interviews, male unionists in the union hierarchy continue to view women's family commitments as the problem rather than looking at the way the union movement has developed as a masculine space.

Although the MTUC leaders espouse the importance of having women as union leaders, in many cases they continue to see women workers in an ambiguous way. Trade unionism in Malaysia was established at a time when production was defined as a male domain and reproduction a female sphere. Women's primary role was seen as mother, not as worker. In modern Malaysia, this mindset has been reinforced by both the state's discursive representation of women as mothers of the nation and the Islamic emphasis on the family (Crinis 2004). Rohana Ariffin (1988) argues that women workers are generally poorly represented in unions because of the ways capital and patriarchy organize social production and reproduction and that gender relations and the sexual division of labour in society as a whole obstruct women's involvement in unions. Ariffin's work demonstrates that in the late 1980s, male trade unionists regarded 'women's issues' as relevant to women only and did little to educate male unionists about the challenges that women face in the workforce. In addition, women workers were not offered or expected to fill leadership roles because male workers in unions reinforced discourses of women as wives and mothers rather than as workers or activists (Crinis 2004).

According to a male education officer of the MTUC, there are two main reasons why women unionists are important. The first is as a source of information about women's concerns because 'women are not willing to talk about women's issues to men; we cannot talk to women about maternity leave, maternity related issues, cycle-related issues or sexual harassment issues'. The second reason he believes women unionists are important is because they are perceived as a means of 'softening up' employers. According to the education officer, negotiations with employers are conducted more amicably when a woman is involved: 'I find that the soft spot will always be there when a woman is present' (interview with MTUC education officer April–May 2006). The same education officer cited 'family commitments' as the major obstacle to the success of the MTUC's attempt to promote women. He claimed that even though many women have become very active unionists, 'once married I lose good women in the union because of their husbands'. He argued that married women are unable to fulfil their duties because of their husbands' disapproval and because the stress associated with their activism can lead to the breakdown of the family:

> I had two women who I thought could become union leaders some time back but you know they got divorced and they still continued with union

> work after they were divorced. These are some of the things that make me feel very sad, I don't know the answer but inside me something tells me – it is because they wanted to help others, fellow workers, that they lost their families.
>
> (Interview with MTUC education officer April–May 2006)

In response to this problem, he is considering holding courses for the husbands and wives of trade union officials so he can explain the significance of trade union work and the importance of union meetings.

The education officer's comments reflect the broader fact that while male trade unionists may acknowledge women's difficulties and want to see the numbers of unionized women and women office bearers increase, they still see women's primary responsibility as being in the home. While both men and women are viewed as important for parenting, the housework and the responsibility for family care are seen to be women's responsibility. Consequently, the MTUC's gender programme does not really address the sexual politics in the union itself but concentrates on sharing household responsibilities:

> The Gender Training program [creates] awareness about sharing jobs. [In our programs we] identify what the daily routine is, then ask why must you be doing all this, or you think your husband should share, how can he share, what are the restraints you are having in trade union for you not to hold senior positions? What are the obstacles? Is it the husband or your trade union partners? Then from there we come and we will discuss how we can overcome these obstacles what should be done.
>
> (Interview with MTUC education officer April–May 2006)

Both male and female unionists stressed the high levels of commitment and energy women unionists need to have in order to take on the role of office bearers. According to both male and female unionists in the MTUC, women find it difficult filling voluntary leadership roles because of the increased workload this kind of position brings (interview with the MTUC general secretary and the Women's Committee president April–May 2006). Most of the male trade unionists interviewed were quick to defend the fact that there were few women unionists in positions of power (interview with the national executive secretary, National Union of Plantation Workers April–May 2006). As one male unionist pointed out, many Muslim women continue to believe 'it is the duty of the women to ensure that all household work be done by the woman' (interview with MTUC education officer April–May 2006). This type of discourse protects the interests of male unionists in maintaining leadership roles within the union (Kugelberg 2006).

Interviews with women in the MTUC also emphasized women's heavy workload and the obstacles preventing them from taking on leadership roles within the union. Women unionists were also quick to point out that women had to be outspoken in order to take on trade union leadership roles. According to the president of the Women's Committee:

> Drawing the women out to become leaders is very difficult because we still have to balance our employment with our other family commitments. We really have to disengage her from her other responsibilities and this is quite difficult unless she has a really understanding and supportive husband. Malaysians are changing, we agree, but it is still difficult for us you see .... We are hoping that in future there will be an increase [in the number of women in leadership positions] but it will be very gradual. The ones that we have like us, me, are being pulled. We are being pulled in so many different directions – it is difficult to focus on just one aspect. I expect the other women are in the same boat. To be a leader you have to be outspoken so it takes a lot of sacrifice. There is a lot of work to be done.
>
> (Interview with the Women's Committee president, MTUC April–May 2006)

Women activists are prepared to make sacrifices and educate others about standing up for their rights, but they also need the support of male trade unionists. Unions must deal with issues of patriarchy in their own organization (interview with the female general treasurer, Railway Union of Malaya August 2005). The next section turns to a case study of unionism in the garment and textile industry and demonstrates that while the masculine culture of trade unions is apparent, state policies, trade liberalization and transnational migration impede women's struggles and make it all the more difficult for trade unions to represent workers in the garment and textile industry.

The garment and textile trade unions in Johor, Selangor and Penang

Unions do not have a wide reach in the garment and textile industry. As noted earlier, only 12 per cent of workers in the industry are unionized, despite the presence of a separate garment and textile union in each state. There are over 200 garment and textile factories registered with the Malaysian Textile Manufacturers Association (MTMA) and another 150 with the Malaysian Knitting Manufacturers Association (MKMA), but only 40 factories in Johor, Penang and Selangor – the major centres for garment and textile production – are unionized, the largest number in Johor. This section outlines the differences in garment industries in Johor, Selangor and Penang in order to explain the complex and diverse struggles that unions face in organizing workers in the manufacturing industries.

In Johor, of the 157 garment and textile factories that produce mostly for the export market, only 21 are unionized. Most of the manufacturing production in Johor is undertaken in the factory or subcontracted to another manufacturer, with many of these factories producing for American brand names. The union in Johor is constantly negotiating with workers to join a union but with relatively little success. According to the trade union secretary, it is common for 'union busting' employers to frighten workers and dismiss union officials if they are observed organizing workers. In one example, the union managed to get the

workers in one factory to the point of joining the union but management threatened to reduce the workers' wages if they proceeded. Similarly, in 2001, Ramatex Textile Industries suspended 70 workers for 14 days because of their trade union activities. Most of those dismissed were area committee officials of the union at the plant level (Trade Union World 2001). The union, however, spends a great deal of time and resources reporting unfair dismissal cases to the Human Resources Ministry and other interested international bodies (interview with the secretary, Johor Textile Trade Union April–May 2006).

The number of female members in the Johor union is much higher than the numbers of female members in Selangor or Penang (interviews with the secretaries of the Textile Unions, Johor, Penang and Selangor, August 2005, April–May 2006). According to the general secretary of the Johor Textile Union, the reason for their success is because:

> We promote women to play a leading role in the unions. For 15 years we have given the position of Vice President to a woman and women fill 80 per cent of the executive council. We also recognize that male workers do not have the same issues as women workers because of women's family commitments. We do what we can to help our female members solve their problems but we do not go against the government.
>
> (Interview with the secretary, Johor Textile and Garment Workers Union April–May 2006)

Johor Textile Union was also the first trade union in the industry to accept the fact that 'foreign workers are here to stay' (interview with the secretary, Textile Trade Union Johor April–May 2006). This was important because in the past, foreign workers were perceived as undermining the wages and conditions of Malaysian citizens (*New Straits Times* 1997). In 2001, the vice-president of the MTUC stated that 'we understand the migrants' position, but when they agree to work longer hours for less pay this angers local workers who are then put at a disadvantage during recruitment drives or lay-offs' (Trade Union World 2001). The secretary of the Johor Textile Union realized, however, that garment manufacturers in the state of Johor employ large numbers of foreign workers. For example, the *Monthly Manpower Report* of one factory showed that over 50 per cent of the workforce consists of foreign workers, who make up at least 80 per cent of the factory's production workers (interview with factory management April–May 2006). Female foreign workers are recruited from Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, while male foreign workers are recruited from Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Women are employed on three-year contracts (except for Indonesians, who are employed on two-year contracts). They work two shifts, in the morning and afternoon, and are paid a daily rate. They have monthly medical check-ups to ensure that they are healthy and can be sent home if diagnosed with an illness or pregnancy (interview with factory management April–May 2006).[4]

In Selangor, the situation is very different. There are approximately 296

female union members out of a total membership of 538. The union's small number of members means that it is largely dependent on financial support from the MTUC and the ILO. This also means that there is very little money available to employ full-time unionists other than the secretary of the Textile Trade Union, making it all the more difficult to organize workers in such a fragmented industry. According to the secretary of the Textile Trade Union, the situation in Kuala Lumpur resembles a 'race to the bottom' and unionists face a dismal future organizing workers, especially foreign workers, because there is little chance that unions can deal with exploitative labour conditions of a 'ghost-like' undocumented labour force (interview with the secretary, Selangor Textile Trade Union April–May 2006). The parlous state of the Selangor Textile Trade Union is related to the structure of the industry in Selangor. While there are a number of large-to-medium factories manufacturing for the export market operating under the same labour compliance system as in Johor, the bulk of manufacturing is done by subcontractors and outworkers, most of which produce primarily for the local market (interview with the secretary, Selangor Textile Trade Union June 1999, April–May 2006). Sweatshops and sweatshop conditions stem from the high levels of competition in the local and regional industry. Since the end of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) in 2004 and the ASEAN Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), manufacturers producing for the local market are continually cutting the cost in order to compete with the large number of garments that are being imported into the country from Indonesia, Thailand and other neighbouring countries. According to an MKMA spokesperson, there is not enough monitoring of the garments coming into the country. An invoice, for example, may specify that there are 20 dozen garments in a container when in actual fact there are 40 dozen (interview with MKMA spokesperson April–May 2006).

Workers employed by these subcontractors are not unionized and have little recourse to bargaining power; many are married women who have to work from home so they can care for young children. They rarely have a contract with their employer and are paid on a piece-rate system. Trade unionists face extreme difficulties in their struggle to represent home-based workers in Kuala Lumpur. As a result, the working conditions of female workers in the home-based industry range far below the minimum standards in the formal sector of the industry. Unlike the factories in Johor, these sweatshop employers often utilize undocumented foreign workers. Estimates suggest that between 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 undocumented foreign workers are active in Malaysia's economy, and according to the trade union secretary in Selangor, undocumented workers are exploited in garment sweatshops operating in and around Kuala Lumpur (interview with the secretary, Selangor Textile Trade Union April–May 2006). It is difficult, however, to find firm figures on undocumented foreign workers' involvement in the garment industry, so these estimates rely on anecdotal evidence.

The situation is different again in Penang where a majority of unionized workers in textiles and garments are male workers, and men constitute the

majority of office bearers. According to the Penang Textile Union secretary, the industry's workforce is fragmented and the numbers of unionized workers are quite low. In earlier times, larger numbers of women workers were unionized. In 1992, for example, there were over 5,000 members of the union, the majority of whom were women, but in the last decade garment factories have either replaced local workers with foreign workers or relocated to either newly developing states in Malaysia or countries such as Cambodia and China, reducing the numbers of union members by about 90 per cent. A study conducted on 16 garment and textile factories in Penang in 1994 showed that all except three factories employed Bangladeshis or other foreign labour in their efforts to cut the costs of manufacturing (*Penang Union Newsletter* 1994). Trade unionists have been lobbying the government to legislate a minimum wage so foreign workers can be paid the same wage as Malaysian workers, but with no success.

The Textile Trade Union in Penang, however, has a history of broader labour activism in which trade unionists, academics and feminist NGOs have lobbied for women's rights and have been instrumental in bringing attention to health and safety issues in the workplace, domestic violence and the high levels of sexual violence in Malaysian society (Ariffin 1997; Ng 2001). The Penang Textile Trade Union has also worked with the leaders of in-house unions in the electronic factories to 'change these unions into fighting unions', and as a result some electronic workers have formed their own trade union (interview with the secretary, Penang Textile Trade Union June 1999). The union is also a member of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF), which, according to the Penang secretary, is especially important for women workers because of its campaign to increase women's membership rates and the number of women in leadership roles. While it is commendable that the Textile Trade Union in Penang has joined an international union organization that works to promote the interests of women workers (interview with the secretary, Penang Textile Trade Union August 2005), it is puzzling that although the union embarked on a programme called 'Women's Participation in Trade Union Work' as early as 1992 (*Penang Union Newsletter* 1992), no female unionists have been selected for the secretary's role.

As this discussion demonstrates, Malaysian unions in these three states face a complex situation when organizing women workers. In Selangor and Penang, the most significant barriers to unionization have been a combination of state policy, industry fragmentation, employer union-busting and the recruitment of foreign workers. While employers have made it difficult for unions to increase the numbers of female members and trade union leaders, especially in sectors with a high number of foreign workers, the masculine culture of unions also plays a significant role in determining how many women join them. In the Johor Textile Trade Union, there are significant numbers of women in leadership roles while male unionists largely run the unions in Selangor and Penang. To make these unions more attractive to women workers, unions need female leaders who understand the issues that women face in their working and private lives. Gender education programmes for male unionists go some way towards challenging the

masculine culture of unions, but according to the president of the MTUC Women's Committee 'gender' is viewed in relation to women only: 'if we are just talking about gender programs [in mainstream trade union education] then it might be that just all women turn up because the men think this is a woman's thing'. Unless the union movement addresses the active politics of resistance towards women in leadership roles, the number of women in unions will remain low and NGOs will continue to have a greater role in addressing women's workplace issues.

Beyond the union movement

One of the ways female union activists have responded to the continuing barriers to women's participation both in the MTUC and in the state-based unions has been to create new ways of addressing women's issues outside the union movement. They have created their own feminist space by joining forces with women's groups to address important issues relevant to women workers. In Malaysia, as in other countries in Southeast Asia, feminist NGOs have played a pivotal role as a vehicle for alternative forms of organizing. Activists such as Irene Fernandez from *Tenaganita* and Irene Zavier from *Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor* have been particularly outspoken against government practices and are renowned for supporting foreign workers and unorganized working-class women in the manufacturing industries (Todd and Bhopal 2002: 86). For example, *Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor* has been instrumental in attempting to cultivate workers' confidence and negotiating skills in small workshop groups. As a result, women workers in the export manufacturing sector are more inclined to seek help from NGOs than from unions (interview with Irene Zavier September 1993). The association of women unionists with feminist NGOs also provides an avenue for activism to develop among female trade unionists. Unlike unions, the government has not placed limitations on liberal feminist organizations, which are allowed to operate as long as they respect the government, Islamic laws and the family. However, women's groups seldom challenge the gender division of society in which women are held responsible for the family and the home.

The MTUC Women's Committee has joined forces with feminist NGOs and formed the Joint Action Group against Violence against Women (JAG–VAW). One of the most positive actions taken by the Women's Committee of the MTUC is to work with other women's groups to appeal to the government to amend the Sexual Harassment Code of Practice to include all workplaces as well as domestic workers and home workers. In 1988, the women's section of the MTUC launched a specific campaign against sexual harassment in the workplace after receiving a series of complaints from its members. In the 1990s, they joined forces with the All Women's Action Society (AWAM) in an awareness campaign that targeted all sections of society. This collaboration reached a milestone when the Ministry of Human Resources announced its intention to prepare and issue a Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual

Harassment in the Workplace. AWAM and the Women's Committee were invited to sit on the Technical Committee responsible for drafting the Code, which was launched in August 1999 (Ng 2001). When a study on behalf of JAG–VAW showed that only 4,500 of a total of 400,000 employers had adopted the Code, the MTUC and women's groups revived JAG to campaign on specific changes to its implementation, arguing that the Code should be made binding in all workplaces. The Women's Committee and the women's groups continue to closely monitor the ways the Code is implemented in the factories and the support that women receive. Before this campaign, sexual harassment was not officially acknowledged because many women were afraid to come forward. Research conducted on six pioneer companies in Malaysia from 2000 to 2001 found that 35 per cent of the 1,483 respondents had experienced one or more forms of sexual harassment in their workplace (*Asian Labour News* 2005). Now, there is evidence that the situation is changing as more women are informed of their rights as workers and as the government increasingly recognizes that sexual harassment in the workplace is a serious issue.

Although there are few signs of real cooperation between trade unions and feminist NGOs on labour issues beyond concerns like sexual harassment, the Women's Committee's collaboration with NGOs has strengthened women unionist's activism on broader issues. Since first conducting research in Malaysia in 1993, I have witnessed a definite increase in women's engagement in activism in the labour sphere. This is largely due to the growth of the Malay middle class and the privileges accorded to middle-class women by the government. The state in Malaysia has afforded a considerable space to local feminist politics, and this in turn has benefited women leaders in the union movement (Ng and Chee 1999).

Conclusion

Malaysian women have made a significant contribution to the labour movement, but their labour activism has been overshadowed to some extent by unions' struggle to represent workers in an environment of economic trade liberalization. The MTUC's attempts at increasing the numbers of women workers in the unions have been persistently frustrated by government policies on union organizing and employers' preference for in-house unions in the manufacturing sector. The recruitment of large numbers of foreign workers has also prevented unions from organizing workers in areas such as the garment and textile industry. However, the main barrier to better integration of women within the union movement continues to be the culture of the unions themselves. In response to unions' failure to deal effectively with women's issues, women unionists have joined forces with feminist NGOs to raise community awareness about women's labour rights and the level of domestic violence and sexual harassment that women experience in the home and the workplace. These campaigns have made women more aware of their position in society and may eventually lead to an awareness of the sexual politics of other institutions, including the trade unions.

Notes

1 In the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur, the women members of the MTUC managed two hostels/centres for women workers in the EPZs for 20 years. These centres provided a focal point for organizing the largely female labour force of the zone. Through their life in the centre, the women shared their problems and were made aware of trade union work. Proof of the success of this ICFTU-supported initiative is that a group of women who had spent time at the centre went on to create their own hostel, and five of the women participated in the foundation of a new trade union for male and female electronics workers (Trade Union World 2001).

2 According to the general secretary of the MTUC, female workers in the electronic industries should have their own trade union and the government should ignore the protests of the big US and Japanese companies because 'we feel that 20 years ago industrialization was very minimal and Malaysians needed the jobs but the situation is very different now we have two million foreign workers in the country so we can do without these companies' (interview with the MTUC president 2006).

3 The constitution of the MTUC provides for the position of one vice-president to be reserved for a woman that is the chair of the Women's Committee who is elected in the Women's Committee's own convention every three years. All other positions except the youth committee chair are elected in a congress every three years, and only two women have been elected to this position; all other positions are held by male unionists (interview with the Women's Committee president, MTUC 2006).

4 A dialogue between NGOs and workers highlighted how foreign workers feel insecure in their host country. It also suggested that young migrant women often do not have the skills to live in a big city away from family and friends. Some foreign workers also felt frightened going out in their free time because random police searches made them feel insecure, especially when they are pressured by the police for money (ActionAid Vietnam 2004).

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5 Sri Lanka

Contradictions for women in labour organizing

Janaka Biyanwila

The main public sector nurses' union in Sri Lanka, the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU), has been led by a Buddhist monk since its inception in 1969. This link between a Buddhist monk and a 'modern' secular institution is symbolic of a complex multilayered post-colonial history, where union strategies both contest and create consent for state strategies promoting patriarchal ethno-nationalist projects. The existence of a nurses' union led by a Buddhist monk also reveals the limitations of women workers' approach to mobilization, which neglects patriarchal notions of 'femininity' and 'women's work'. While the nurses' contentious collective action in the male-dominated public sphere elaborates their class identities as women workers, their received image is one of docile professional workers aspiring for bourgeoisie respectability. In short, their collective action is shaped by a complex set of class, gender and ethnic relations that interplay in their struggles for status, respectability and dignity.

The nurses' struggles are located at the intersection of the labour movement and the women's movement in Sri Lanka. Both movements are shaped by the transformation of a post-colonial national developmental state into market-driven neo-liberal economy after the introduction of economic 'liberalization' in 1977. With 'development' increasingly linked with international competitiveness, the state promotion of transnational capital interests has reinforced authoritarian state tendencies to contain dissent. While World Bank-promoted structural adjustment policies and export-oriented industrialization absorbed more women into waged work, those women mostly entered low-paid, insecure, casualized work in the periphery of labour markets. In deflecting resistance from activist women's groups as well as unions, the state reinforced patriarchal ethno-nationalist notions of nationhood, in particular a Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism which complements market-driven state strategies.

In terms of trying to understand the movement politics of trade unions, most trade union theory, as well as social movement theory, tends to be 'West-centred, gender-blind, and focused on national events' (Moghadam 1999: 386). According to Moghadam (1999: 367), globalization has created a 'new constituency' of 'working women and organizing women', 'who may herald a potent anti-systemic movement'. She argues that 'social movements may form, and organizations may mobilize, under a set of global conditions, and not only

in the context of national opportunities and constraints' (Moghadam 1999: 387). Moghadam's arguments overlap social movement unionism perspectives, which focus on revitalizing the movement politics of unions by building alliances with other local and global social movements and civil society actors (Moody 1997; Lambert 2002; Waterman 2004). At the core of social movement unionism are independent unions that build alliances to engage in contentious collective action. An 'independent' union broadly relates to those unions autonomous from the influences of the employers, states or political parties and based on an active membership organized around participatory democratic principles (Lambert 2002). Independent democratic unions are of particular significance for unions in peripheral capitalist economies, where most unions are controlled by political parties, employers or the state. In contrast to independent unions that enact economic unionism models promoted by neo-liberal strategies (World Bank 1995), social movement unionism focuses on regaining union identities as civil society actors, engaging in contentious collective action by building alliances (Moody 1997; Lambert 2002; Waterman 2004).

The main focus of this chapter is on the contradictory effects of PSUNU's strategies on women workers' activism – particularly how the PSUNU's strategic orientation overlaps with patriarchal ethno-nationalist state strategies. This compromise with state strategies reveals the complexities of women's collective agency; how women 'collectively transform themselves in seeking to transform society' (Archer 2001: 260). This chapter begins with a brief sketch of how the nurses are positioned as professional women workers and in their relations with the union movement and the women's movement. This positioning is then explained in terms of the changing role of the state and public sector health care provision under neo-liberal strategies. The next section moves from this broader local context to describing the PSUNU's strategic orientation in terms of collective action and the influence of the monk's leadership. In analysing the strategic orientation of the union in terms of alliances, this section also explains the ways the PSUNU interacts with other health sector unions, the women's movement and global unions. In conclusion, this chapter argues for reinforcing women's capacity for collective action by considering social movement unionism strategies and rethinking issues related to organization, alliances and values of worker solidarity.

Women in the economy and the health care sector

Although women in Sri Lanka have fared relatively well within the broader South Asian context in terms of life expectancy, literacy and health, women's participation in the labour force remains less than half the rate for men (Asian Development Bank 2004; World Bank 2005). In 2004, 31 per cent of women were in paid work compared with 67 per cent of men (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2004) – women's participation in that year had declined from 36 per cent in 1999. The decline in women's participation rates and the increase in unemployment from 11.8 per cent in 1999 to 14.8 per cent in mid-2002 are attributed to

the fall in economic activities in rural areas, including the closure of rural factories (Asian Development Bank 2004: 16). The broader structural changes in the economy have seen a decline in the number of women employed in agriculture, fisheries and the forestry sector from 48.6 per cent of the female labour force in 1999 to 39.5 per cent in 2002 (Asian Development Bank 2004: 17). While the proportion of women working in manufacturing has increased from 19.3 per cent in 1999 to 23.9 per cent in 2002, the deregulation of labour markets has also increased the number of women employed on a casual basis from 51.7 to 58.4 per cent during the same period (Asian Development Bank 2004: 17).

As professional public sector workers, nurses are within the core of the labour market and have access to employment security, training and collective bargaining rights. Nurses' professional status was enhanced with the introduction of a Bachelor of Science degree in 1994 and a Masters in Nursing Science programme in 2000. While public sector wages for women are low, they include built-in increments, promotions, allowances and other bonuses – although in comparison with a similarly qualified junior male manager, a nurse's wages were nearly 40 per cent less in 2000. Amidst an enduring shortage of nurses in the early 1990s, the provision of duty leave for two years opened opportunities for nurses to spend time overseas as migrant workers. However, these new opportunities brought with them similar threats, such as poor working conditions, low worker protection, poor-quality health care and social costs (Chandralatha 2004).

In Sri Lanka itself, nurses in the public health care system entered a new set of relations with the launch of neo-liberal or 'liberalization' policies. This began when the bourgeois liberal United National Party (UNP) came to power in 1977 and introduced a new presidential constitution in 1978 that articulated a Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalist project based on a 'righteous society' or *Dharmista Samajaya* rhetoric. After 17 years of UNP rule, the other major bourgeois liberal party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), gained power in 1994 as part of a broad coalition supported by the labour movement. Although the new coalition created some union freedoms, the UNP returned to power in 2000. After the UNP negotiated a ceasefire agreement in 2002 with a strategy that involved the US and Northern governments, the SLFP and the ethno-nationalist/Marxist *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP, Peoples' Liberation Front) formed a fragile coalition to defeat the UNP at the 2004 parliamentary elections and again during the 2005 presidential elections (Ganguly 2004). While entrenched in ethno-nationalist dynamics, a significant feature of post-1977 party politics has been a convergence towards neo-liberal strategies aimed at the privatization of health care.

Championed by multilateral and regional agencies such as the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation and the Asian Development Bank, the marketization of health care in Sri Lanka began in 1977, shifting the role of the state from direct control over providing health care to a coordinating regulatory role. Ironically, the privatization of the public health care system began at a time when Third-World countries were pushing to strengthen state provision of

accessible, affordable and comprehensive health care services under the Alma Ata Declaration of 1978. However, within a decade, the World Health Organization's role in formulating health sector policies was overtaken by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The main elements of the marketization of health care include the corporatization of public health care, the promotion of private–public partnerships, the changing role of the public sector as a provider of health care, the expansion of health insurance and the development of 'medical tourism' (Lethbridge 2004: 22). In Sri Lanka, a handful of luxury hospitals such as the Apollo Hospital emerged, catering to a rich Sri Lankan and foreign clientele. According to the Apollo Hospitals' marketing strategy, the '350 beds state-of-the-art multi specialty hospital' is 'equipped with the latest equipment and is positioned to cater to the needs of the people in South East Asia' (Apollo Hospitals Colombo 2006). Meanwhile, the public health care system is under-resourced and malnutrition has become a significant national health problem.[1]

The actual nursing care provided through the public health system is shaped by working conditions, which reflect over 30 years of under-funding in the public health care sector. The nurses' workday includes non-nursing tasks such as doing linen and drug inventories, clerical work, reception and serving meals. Nurses are now doing more work and longer shifts and working at a faster pace. With enduring shortages of nurses (a shortage of 7,000 nurses in 2004), even the opportunity to refuse overtime work is limited (Chandralatha 2004). By the mid-1990s, most nurses worked in poorly maintained, over-crowded hospitals. Many government hospitals lacked beds, facilities for visitors, toilet facilities and basic amenities (Attanayake 1997). Despite official safety guidelines, the nurses encountered additional health risks due to basic shortages of soap, masks and gloves and bathing facilities (Presidential Task Force 1997; Ministry of Health 1998). The paucity of resources which leads to the intensification of nursing care work is also partly due to the policies of the male-dominated public health care bureaucracy and hospital administrations.

Women workers, feminism and Sri Lanka's authoritarian, militarized state

Changing workplace conditions and nurses' responses to them in many ways reflect the changing role of the state. Since 1977, the articulation of a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism or ethno-nationalism has increasingly gained momentum as the dominant notion of nationhood in this multi-ethnic, multi-religious society (Jayawardena 1987; Seneviratne 1999). The overarching influence of ethnic identity politics, particularly in the realm of representative politics, along with ongoing civil war, has restrained women workers' capacity to mobilize in Sri Lanka. The UNP's 'righteous society' or *Dharmishta samajaya* rhetoric paralleled the conservative Victorian values advanced by Thatcher during the same period. Meanwhile, the JVP, which recovered from the failed bloody insurgency of 1988–90, maintained an ideological mix of Leftist socialism and Sinhala

patriotism (Uyangoda 2000). Along with the JVP, the newly launched Buddhist monks' party, the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU, National Sinhala Heritage Party), promotes a Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalist project based on a militarized authoritarian state (Ganguly 2004).

The promotion of a unitary state under a narrow Sinhala-Buddhist notion of nationhood has obscured the diversity of ethnic communities with overlapping hierarchies of caste and regional identities, such as low-country and up-country Sinhalese or Jaffna, Vanni, Eastern and Hill Country Tamils. More importantly, assertions of hegemonic nationalisms reproduce patriarchal structures rooted in the subordination of women as embodiments of 'culture' and 'femininity' (Das 1996; Omvedt 2000). This relates to emphasizing women's identities as mothers, wives and daughters, while separating and subordinating their identities as workers and citizens. With 'women's work' narrowed to the reproductive economy and to the realm of the household, patriarchal notions of 'femininity' deploy a range of cultural images of 'good' mothers, wives and daughters that restrain women's capacity for collective action (Das 1996). This has implications for women workers' mobilization in a male-dominated public sphere with violent tendencies.

The rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was reproduced in a series of state strategies with a new militarized, violent dimension in the post-1977 period. During the early post-independence phase, ethno-nationalist state strategies involved the denial of citizenship rights to the plantation Tamil workers in 1948; making Sinhala the official language in 1956; privileging Buddhism, giving it the 'foremost place' under the 1972 Constitution; and the resettlement of Sinhala families in predominantly Tamil regions – a process which began under British rule in 1930s (Jayawardena 1985, 1987). However, the assertion of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the post-1977 phase unleashed 'chauvinist hysteria and intolerance' (Jayawardena 1987: 1), reinforcing patriarchal structures with a new tendency towards violence.

The implementation of neo-liberal policies in Sri Lanka reinforced authoritarian state tendencies that directly undermined the labour movement and working-class parties. While promoting Sinhala-Buddhist ethnic identity politics to displace working-class movements, the new state extended its coercive apparatus, articulating an increasingly militarized state (Obeyesekere 1984; Fernando 1991). From 1985 to 1998, armed forced personnel increased by 80.5 per cent, and by 1998 per capita defence expenditure in Sri Lanka was US$39.20 compared with US$29.30 in Pakistan, the next highest in South Asia (World Bank 2005). State power was concentrated around the president, a few individuals within the ruling party and the bureaucracy (Stokke 1997). The 1978 constitution introduced an executive presidential system, which extended wide-ranging powers of intervention to the president that overrode parliamentary as well as electoral processes. The centralization of the state under the new constitution added a new militarized dimension of state violence with the enactment of the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* (PTA) in 1979. The introduction of the PTA institutionalized torture and 'disappearances' and accommodated a culture of secrecy in the government (Mallick 1998).

The changing role of the state is significant for understanding the strategic orientation of the nurses' union. While restraining civil society and limiting space available for contentious collective action, the authoritarian state also relies on party-subordinated unions as well as specific actors within civil society [religious organizations, media and development of non-government organizations (NGOs)] to gain legitimacy and create consent (Uyangoda 2000). In this context, nurses' struggles as workers, and as a part of the labour movement, overlap with the women's movement. The nursing profession was introduced by the military medical system of the British Empire, primarily for the service of colonial administrators. Under British colonialism, the trade union movement's support for women's franchise in the 1920s contributed to the extension of women's participation in the male-dominated public sphere (De Alwis and Jayawardena 2001). In transforming the male biases in the provisioning of public health care, the women's movement demanded education for women as a means of accessing the professions (Brohier 1994).

The formation of working-class parties in the mid-1930s further strengthened women workers' struggles, enabling new female-led initiatives. The first autonomous women's feminist socialist organization, the *Eksath Kantha Peramun* (EKP, United Women's Front), was launched in 1947, just prior to independence in 1948. It was supported by the working-class parties and extended an agenda of achieving socialism and removing of all discrimination against women (Jayawardena 1986: 135). However, the EKP was dissolved in 1948 after not quite a year of activism. Nevertheless, this feminist socialist trend continues, challenging dominant liberal feminist perspectives.

The strategic orientation of the women's movement shifted in the late 1970s towards a version of liberal feminism that emphasized political rights for women and women's integration into the development process. The women's movement was increasingly co-opted into representative politics and institutional reform with the establishment of the Women's Bureau in 1978. This version of liberal feminism, reflective of the United Nations (UN) ideology at the time, merged with the 'developmentalist school' and highlighted public identities of women as citizens and workers (Jayawardena 1986). Although Sri Lanka ratified the global Women's Convention or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, patriarchal state strategies combined with neo-liberal policies continue to defer legal sanctions capable of enforcing the recommendations (CENWOR 2001). Sri Lanka has had female prime ministers, presidents and ministers, yet women's representation in the national legislature has remained below 5 per cent and is even lower in provincial councils and local government (UNIFEM 2005).

Recognizing the limits of the 'developmental' state, more radical activist women's groups emerged in the late 1970s. Among them, the *Kantha Handa* (Women's Voice) formed in 1978 by a core group of mostly middle-class women with feminist socialist tendencies articulated women's interests as 'not only emancipation but liberation from all oppressive structures and institutions of patriarchy in society' (Jayawardena 1986: 177). Despite the outbreak of the

armed ethnic conflict in 1983 and the ensuing militarization of the state-reinforced authoritarian state tendencies, activist women's groups continued to engage in a range of contentious collective action. The women's movement, which regrouped after the 1989–90 violent 'terror' period, introduced a Women's Charter in 1993 based on CEDAW. Under the broad agenda of achieving gender equity and freedom from discrimination, the Women's Charter was able to revitalize women groups in the plantations, rural and urban areas. Although the women's movement gained some ground in 1995 by changing the Penal Code specifically addressing sexual abuse and exploitation, legal enforcement and public awareness of these issues remain weak (CENWOR 2001). While nurses have benefited from the women's movement, their positioning within the state, and as employees within a caring profession dominated by a specific ideology of femininity, has also meant complicity with cultural practices largely dictated and articulated by men. This has implications for nurses in terms of building solidarity not only with the local women's movement but also with other women workers.

The PSUNU: organizing nurses

Between 1977 and 2000, numbers of unionized workers have fluctuated between one and one-and-a-half million workers. In 2000, around 18 per cent, or nearly one million workers out of the 6.3 million employed labour force, were union members. The same year, there were 1,636 unions with around 1.4 million members (Labour Department 2001). This fragmented union movement is dominated by unions affiliated with – and subordinate to – political parties. In this environment, traditional working-class party unions, such as the Communist Party (CP) and Trotskyist *Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (LSSP), are often rendered impotent. According to Labour Ministry categories, the concentration of registered trade unions in 2000 included 140 unions in education, 123 in the health sector, 90 in railways, 61 in the plantations, 36 in *mahaweli*-related (agricultural) activity, 26 in bank-related areas and 19 in the ports (Labour Department 2001). Aside from the railways and the ports, all sectors represent workplaces that employ mostly women workers.

Attacks on more militant unions by ruling party unions, particularly during the early 1980s, led to the reconstitution of the labour movement as well as civil society more generally (Fernando 1988). Although union rights were nominally recognized, militant unions were undermined by government's neo-liberal development discourse. Freedom of association and peaceful protests were portrayed as barriers to furthering 'international competitiveness' and the authoritarian state legitimized new labour regimes banning unions, particularly in free trade zones (Rosa 1989). In 2003, the ruling UNP-led coalition government deployed the armed forces into public hospitals, under emergency regulations, to crush a strike led by the Health Sector Trade Union Alliance involving around 30,000 workers (Gunaratne 2003). Under the UNP's 17-year rule, party leaders mobilized the UNP's urban union, the *Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya* (JSS), to

undermine opposition unions and the independent labour movement (Obeyesekere 1984). In the plantations, the UNP expanded its own union, the *Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union* (LJEWU), while establishing a strategic alliance with the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), another political party representing mostly Hill Country Tamils. This mobilization of UNP party unions and the alliance with the CWC relied on political patronage to deepen party control over unions, while openly confronting and eliminating militant unions and activists.

In July 1980, the UNP put down a widespread strike. It is estimated that around 40,356 strikers lost their jobs, with nearly 75,000 public sector and 15,000 private sector workers going on strike (Fernando 1983, 1988). What was later commemorated as 'Black July' was an historic event in the erosion of the labour movement. It was a decisive, targeted attack on working-class parties, militant unions and labour militancy. Those public sector workers who returned to work following the strike were further victimized through compulsory leave and transfers or by the denial of promotions and wage benefits. A small network of activists has continued to campaign for compensation over this discrimination. While the July 1980 strike highlighted the nature of the new, authoritarian state and its promotion of party-subordinated unions, it also revealed the weakness of traditional working-class parties and the inability of the ethnonationalist/Marxist JVP to dominate the labour movement. Following the July 1980 strike, the JVP's 1988–90 insurrection further undermined the labour movement with the targeted elimination of radical trade union leaders and activists. A significant feature of the JVP insurrection and the counter-insurrection of the state was the subordination of women within the ethnocentric identity politics of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

In the post-1977 period, the PSUNU and the doctors' union, Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) emerged as the two prominent health sector unions for several categories of workers including midwives, pharmacists, registered and assistant medical officers, *ayurvedic* doctors and other supplementary health workers. While working-class parties emphasize the necessity of organizing workers across the health sector, most unions in the health sector are narrowly occupation-based associations. A broad-based alliance among the health sector workers did emerge in 2003, under the Health Sector Trade Union Alliance. This was led by a new nurses' union, the Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA), which was launched in 1996 after splitting from the PSUNU. However, in a context where most women workers are unorganized, the PSUNU continued to be a key union within the labour movement.

Strategic orientation

The PSUNU's bureaucratic mode of organization, legitimized through formal representative democratic structures, has maintained a male monk, venerable Muruththettuwe Ananda, as its leader since its establishment. This has a significant influence on the nurses' organization and their strategic orientation. The PSUNU's formal structures promote organizational democracy through annual

conferences and monthly meetings, and the general secretary post or the constitutional leadership position is reserved for a female nurse. Yet although most executive committee members are women, the two key positions, the leadership and administrative secretary posts, are held by men. Both men, the leader (the monk) and the administrative secretary, are influential in shaping union strategies. As the nurses are paid a moderate wage and have employment security, the union has been able to build a strong financial base. Their resources have been supplemented by the monk's voluntary services and the location of the union within a Buddhist temple premises (the *Abhayarama* temple).

The PSUNU's internal organizational culture is shaped by a benevolent paternalist leadership that restricts internal debates and discussions that might encourage critical perspectives within the union or inspire creative initiatives from the membership. Critical perspectives or calls for debate are generally dismissed by personalizing them:

> Many times through the *Hedamina* (union newspaper) we have identified those who have used our union and who then become treacherous, all for their own personal gain. Their treachery against the nurses and the honourable nursing service is based on personal gain. Their class betrayal motivated by greediness for official posts, wealth, and other benefits may be a trait they are born with. However, the history of the PSUNU has proven that so-called emancipators have a short life span.
>
> (PSUNU 1999: 12)

As collective actors, the nurses' capacity for contentious action relates to their strategies as well as resources. The PSUNU is the largest health sector union with a membership around 14,500 nurses in 2000. It is also one of the financially well-resourced unions, with a large union building in the city of Colombo. Close to 95 per cent of nurses in the public sector belong to the PSUNU, and most of the membership – nearly 95 per cent – are women. Most members are of Sinhala-Buddhist ethnic backgrounds, with Tamil members (accounting for around 20 per cent of the membership) mostly in the North and the East provinces. As a party-independent union, the PSUNU articulates worker interests in terms of occupational interest with the goal of collective bargaining. This strategic orientation reflects a form of economic unionism, where union interests are narrowed to the workplace as labour market actors. In emphasizing representative politics, the PSUNU often discounts its capacities for movement politics and its role as a civil society actor.

The PSUNU ran a campaign in the early- to mid-1980s to improve wages and conditions. This was a key instance of the nurses' contentious politics in resisting an antagonistic authoritarian state. A broad-based countermovement had emerged within the public sector when public sector workers lost the right to go on strike in 1979 under the Essential Services Act. The unsuccessful strike of July 1980 marked the end of this movement. The PSUNU, preoccupied with the encroachment of a new UNP nurses' union, associated with the JSS and avoided participat-

ing in the strike. The PSUNU continued its campaign in July 1981 for changes in their shifts, a new grading scale, increases in the footwear allowance, overtime pay, allowances for public holidays and a three-day-week night shift (PSUNU 1999). They began with a sick-note campaign and a black armband protest that later escalated into a strike. The president refused to negotiate with the monk, claiming it was against Buddhist principles. In the meantime, the president held talks with his own party union (the JSS) and made a public radio announcement claiming that the strike was settled. With increasing state repression, including the threat of losing their New Year bonus payment, the PSUNU temporarily retreated.

When the PSUNU relaunched its campaign in March 1985, a range of civil society groups and activists, including those from the broader union movement and women's movement, joined in support of the nurses. When the campaign spread nationwide, the UNP government confronted the nurses by enacting emergency regulations to ban the PSUNU and to freeze its bank accounts. Activist nurses expelled from state hostels were temporarily housed at the union office at the *Abhayarama* temple and surrounding NGO offices (Civil Rights Movement 1986; De Silva 1986). To support the striking nurses, various progressive monks, trade union leaders, academics, doctors, lawyers and political leaders converged at the temple. As expected, the state reacted. With the police conveniently restricted to their barracks not far from the temple, the UNP deployed its thugs on a morning in May 1985. However, the people gathered at the temple were able to chase away the thugs, successfully confronting a violent symbol of the authoritarian state (De Silva 1986). The 1985 mobilization, characterizing a moment of social movement unionism, was soon institutionalized within – and subordinated to – the state.

The PSUNU's resources received a massive boost by its compliance with the populist state strategies of President Premadasa (1988–93). During this phase, the union was increasingly accommodated within the state (particularly by the Health Department) and gained a valuable piece of land in Colombo with a low-interest loan for a new building. The new union building, the *Heda Madura* (Nursing Palace), built mainly for conferences, was opened in early 1992. The minister of health was the chief guest, along with other state bureaucrats. While it is mostly used for holding workshops and seminars, some of the space is rented out as offices, living quarters and venues for special events such as weddings and press conferences. This state patronage of the union ended with the assassination of President Premadasa at a UNP party May Day rally in 1993.

Although union resources have expanded, the nurses' capacity for collective action has been shaped by its organizational form and strategic orientation. The PSUNU's articulation of worker interests in terms of an occupational interest for professional recognition overlaps with the orientation of the Sri Lanka Nurses Association (SLNA). However, unlike the SLNA, the union's willingness and capacity to engage in contentious collective action is significant for enhancing nurses' collective agency. Nevertheless, the fact that the union has a Buddhist monk as a union leader conveys contradictions of nurses' struggles for professional recognition as well as agency.

The PSUNU and the monk

The monk's popularity as a union leader directly relates to the symbolic role of Buddhist monks in Sri Lankan society generally. The monk's leadership of the PSUNU is made possible by the privileged relationship that exists between conservative Buddhist monks and the state. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks recognize themselves as 'representative of a single moral community, the moral community of Sinhala Buddhism' (Gunasinghe 1996). In deploying this non-class identity, and downplaying the heterogeneity of the Sinhala-Buddhist community, the monks also obscure their own socio-economic origins. A majority of the monks come from the plebeian lower middle layers of rural society. Although representing a degree of ideological coherence as a homogeneous entity, the monks are 'divided into sects, not on the basis of doctrinal differences, but on caste' with hierarchical differences within the sects (Gunasinghe 1996). The PSUNU's leader and the temple itself is a branch of the dominant Malwathu-Asigiry Siam sect. This sect, associated with the elite *Govigama* caste, is a key beneficiary of state patronage.

The fact that the monk's leadership is rarely contested suggests an organizational culture of benevolent paternalism sustaining a highly centralized decision-making process. The leadership maintains a social distance from the membership, creating a degree of autonomy that enables the monk to act as both community leader and civil society activist. The monk's activism, particularly during the 1977–88 period, mostly represents resistance to an authoritarian state hostile towards the union. In April 1984, the monk was involved with an anti-World Bank campaign called the National Anti-Water Tax organization. In July 1985, he took part in a *satyagraha*, protesting with peasant organizations against the sale of land to private owners. During the 1985–6 period, the monk belonged to a university parent–teacher activist group, defending students who were targets of state violence. This activism subsided under the Premadasa presidency (1988–93), only to re-emerge under the centre-left People's Alliance.

Contradictions in the monk's role in civil society are revealed in his activism within a key Buddhist monks' organization promoting ethno-nationalist identity politics. In mid-2000, the union leader was the general secretary of the Movement for the Protection of Motherland, *Maubima Surekeeme Vyaparaya* (MSV), which launched a broad-based campaign against the PA government efforts to devolve power. Since its launch in 1986, the MSV has maintained a hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist position, opposing the devolution of state power to the regions as a solution towards peace (Amunugama 1991). In 1998, when the peace movement was gaining momentum under a new government, the monk was committed to a military solution: 'I don't think that political proposals are going to solve this. I'm not saying this to destroy innocent people.... The only thing I can see is that *you need terrorism to destroy terrorism*' (Jayasekera 1998: 9).

On the issue of war, the monk represents conservative elements within the state and civil society who promote a narrow ethno-nationalist notion of nation-

alism. On the one hand, the union leadership has leveraged this positioning with the state bureaucracy and political party leaders for union purposes, but on the other it falls in line with the government's war efforts. This contradictory positioning of the PSUNU reveals how forms of independent unionism entrenched in ethno-nationalist politics legitimize authoritarian state forms. The influence of the leadership's ethno-nationalist identity politics is also reflected in the PSUNU's approach to alliances with other local and global unions, the labour movement and the women's movement.

Alliances with other civil society actors

> I don't know why our trade union [PSUNU] is retreating from this common struggle. At least they should have condemned the deployment of security forces in hospitals. We won't be able to fight for our rights in the future if things go on like this.
>
> [H. Manel, a PSUNU member critical of the union's refusal to support the broad alliance of health sector unions in 2003 (Gunaratne 2003)]

The strategic orientation of the PSUNU, which rests on the promotion of an occupational orientation, is based on a form of economic unionism and is limited to building nurses' capacity to engage in contentious collective action. The challenges nurses face involve issues relating to organization, alliances and values. Although nurses provide front-line care, they remain subordinated, and often invisible, within male-biased structures of the health sector bureaucracy, hospitals and unions. Moreover, the nurses' interaction and relations with doctors and other supplementary workers is shaped by the specificity of each hospital, its organizational hierarchies, resources, administration and internal culture. In prioritizing state patronage to remedy nurses' grievances, the PSUNU's economic unionism strategies often create consent to patriarchal ethno-nationalist politics while subordinating workplace-specific issues.

The PSUNU's focus on a narrow, separate, occupational identity has led it to shun alliances with most health sector unions as well as other civil society actors. The PSUNU's external relations with other health sector unions, the women's movement and international unions or labour internationalisms remain peripheral to its strategic orientation. This approach to worker solidarity also reflects the dominant normative orientation to nurses' work identity, which carves out tight boundaries along class, gender and ethnic or cultural lines. From the union's standpoint, the values of nursing culture are firmly rooted in positioning women as caregivers, constructed around 'service to the people' (Kenway and Watkins 1994), and the social responsibility and respectability of this kind of labour. This ideological positioning of the union, which accompanies a top-down populist discourse, sustains conservative notions of 'femininity' that are built into the very definition of nursing (Kenway and Watkins 1994). As a result, the nurses' care work in the market sphere is represented as a 'natural'

extension of women's care labour in the reproductive economy. The conflation of the reproductive economy and the 'private' sphere results in the nurses reproducing patriarchal cultural practices that restrain their capacities for contentious collective action (Kenway and Watkins 1994).

As a part of the labour movement, the PSUNU is positioned within a small network of professional workers' unions. Most of these unions are independent of political parties and consist of public sector workers such as bank employees (Ceylon Bank Employees Union, CBEU), postal and telecommunications workers (Union of Postal and Telecommunications Officers, UPTO), estate staff (Ceylon Estate Staff Union, CESU) and doctors (Government Medical Officers Association, GMOA). Although expressing mainly occupational interests, these unions have engaged in contentious collective action, extending the workplace into issues of privatization, emergency regulations and the devolution of state powers to the regions. While the PSUNU participates in issue-based alliances, efforts to deepen these alliances are often ignored by its paternalist leaders.

The instrumental and ambivalent character of PSUNU's alliances also relate to contradictions and contestations within the PSUNU. In 1996, two dissenting groups emerged within the PSUNU to form two competing unions, the United Health Workers Union (UHWU) and the GNOA. Both of these unions are led by young male nurses who finished their training in the early 1990s and belong to a generation politicized during the JVP insurrection (1988–90). They highlight the PSUNU's weaknesses in terms of education and training, as well as its lack of engagement on contentious issues such as privatization and deregulation. By late 2005, the GNOA was able to expand, building a membership base of around 4,500 nurses. The GNOA leadership was instrumental in launching the Health Sector Trade Union Alliance, which included 54 health sector unions except for the PSUNU (Gunaratne 2003).

The PSUNU's attitude to alliances with other health sector unions is illustrated by the 'uniform' campaign, which began in 1999 and continued into early 2006. This agitation reveals the contradictory nature of the power nurses exercise within the hospital system, particularly in terms of their professional status and hospital working conditions, which demand cooperation with other more proletarian workers. The agitation emerged with the PSUNU's protest against the demands of lower paid 'supplementary' care workers or 'attendants' for a uniform. These workers are mostly women in the lowest rungs of the hospital hierarchy, and demand for the uniform, consisting of white pants and shirts for males and white dresses for females, was long standing (Gunadasa 1999). Protesting against the health minister's decision to allow attendants to wear a uniform, the PSUNU argued that the nurses' uniform is symbolic of a specific professional status and qualification similar to the police. The nurses argued that a similar uniform could lead to confusion among patients, jeopardizing their professional integrity if they were mistakenly identified in a case of neglect or maltreatment. In November 1999, the PSUNU declared a three-hour strike and staged nationwide protests, insisting that hospital directors take disciplinary action against workers who wore the new uniforms. But PSUNU's critics,

including the Joint Council of Professions Supplementary to Medicine (JCPAM), pointed out that even a police uniform is demarcated by badges. They argue that the sarong and sari which attendants have historically worn is simply not practical and a burden at work. According to the critics, the nurses felt that it was undignified for them to wear a similar uniform to their assistants (Gunadasa 1999). Although, the 'assistants' now wear a partial uniform, a jacket to pull over their daily wear, the PSUNU's court case continued into early 2006. The 'uniform' campaign symbolizes how the nurses' stress on their occupational identity also limits their alliances with the women's movement.

As noted earlier, the PSUNU's professional members have only limited alliances with the women's movement. The branding of feminist politics as something external and representative of 'Western' values is at the heart of patriarchal notions of 'femininity'. These attitudes are dominant within the labour movement, political parties as well as the state (Jayawardena 1988). In sustaining anti-feminist tendencies, the monk defends his leadership role as a form of moral duty of benevolent paternalism which promotes male-biased knowledge production. This includes invoking Buddha as the originator of women's liberation and drawing parallels with heroine characters of Buddhist mythic-history, such as *Patachara*.

The monk justifies his leadership by arguing that 'If Buddha helped naked *Patachara*, why can't I help the nurses?' (*Aththa* 1985: 3). However, this conservative interpretation is an enduring strategy associated with the articulation of Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalist projects that ignores a range of women's perspectives, which has extended (and re-valorized) the Buddhist doctrine (Jayawardena 1985; Omvedt 2000). The nurses' occupational orientation, which renders women's unpaid, caring work in the 'reproductive economy' invisible, exposes this male-biased knowledge production. The anti-feminist tendencies that intertwine nurses' identities are reflected in their approach to the International Women's Day. The PSUNU celebrates the International Nurse's Day with state patronage and great fanfare but downplays International Women's Day. The PSUNU's marginalization of International Women's Day is symbolic of its approach to the women's movement as a whole. In avoiding this moment of women's solidarity and dismissing feminism as an external influence, the PSUNU reinforces its patriarchal tendencies while neglecting the movement politics and potential allies within civil society. This neglect of alliances, particularly with the women's movement, also reveals the nature of international union solidarity maintained by dominant global unions.

The PSUNU's main international alliances include the Public Service International (PSI) and the International Federation of Commercial, Clerical, Professional and Technical Employees (FIET). The FIET is one of the four founding unions (the Communications International, the International Graphical Federation, the Media and Entertainment International) of the Union International Network (UNI) launched in January 2000. The UNI along with the PSI are affiliates of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The PSUNU also maintains strategic alliances with labour NGOs oriented towards

non-contentious representative politics such as the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the US-based American Centre for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS). These strategic alliances, often Eurocentric, gender biased and nation-state oriented, are primarily focused on conducting workshops and seminars around industrial relations issues and consequently marginalize the movement politics of unions.[2] In contrast to the PSUNU, which is affiliated with key global unions, the newly formed GNOA illustrates tendencies of a 'new' labour internationalism or global social movement unionism. Although an independent union with the potential for collective action, the PSUNU's nation-state orientation influenced by ethno-nationalist tendencies reveals the necessity of building global worker solidarity. In effect, the PSUNU highlights how 'old' internationalism has narrowed to nation-state strategies and forms of economic unionism restrain the capacity of unions to mobilize.

Conclusion

As one of the largest health sector unions in Sri Lanka, the PSUNU is faced with the marketization of health care, legitimized through ethno-nationalist state strategies. In protecting and expanding their wages and conditions as well as their professional status, nurses articulate their collective interests, mostly in terms of their occupational identity. This has the contradictory effects of resistance to, and accommodation of, authoritarian state strategies and patriarchal ethno-nationalist politics. Although nurses engage in contentious collective action, their emphasis on institutionalized representative politics ultimately marginalizes their collective identity as a civil society actor. The PSUNU's orientation towards the state and political patronage is reinforced by the symbolic role of the monk. While the nurses have gained from this, it has also involved compromises that reinforce and acquiesce to patriarchal structures, as the PSUNU's top-down bureaucratic structures discourage open, democratic dialogue within and outside the union.

Even so, the PSUNU's independent economic unionism, while rife with limitations, has the potential to develop a social movement union orientation. Internally, PSUNU's representative democracy can foster forms of participatory democracy that allow for the creative initiative of its members. This requires the encouragement of internal discussions oriented towards the deepening worker solidarity by linking occupational interests with alliance building. While the rise of an alternative nurses' union, the GNOA, has widened the scope of union strategies, it has also created a space for the rethinking of nurses' attitudes towards worker solidarity and for the strengthening of the collective agency of nurses as women workers.

The structures and activities of the PSUNU illustrate the complexities of building women workers' collective agency within male-biased union strategies and modes of organization. By linking community issues with workplace issues, the PSUNU is likely to encourage a broad range of alliances that can mutually reinforce a potential anti-systemic movement. While alliances are

significant, the capacity for the nurses' union to strengthen women's collective agency also relates to thinking creatively and sharing knowledge about building worker solidarity. For nurses as professional women workers, this involves encouraging new alliances with the women's movement as well as other organized women workers. In turn, the ways the nurses organize, build alliances and articulate their identities as workers are significant for revitalizing the movement dimension of the PSUNU and for reinforcing the collective agency of women workers.

Notes

1 The overall health status and health service provision for the majority of people remain inadequate with around 33 per cent of children below five years facing malnutrition in 2003 (Attanayake 1997; Presidential Task Force 1997). Particularly with enduring war, the public health system is restrained by the war economy, which diverts valuable resources to the war effort, simultaneously spreading death, disease and disability. In terms of poverty, in 2002, 25 per cent of the rural population and 30 per cent of the estate population were defined as in poverty (World Bank 2005). Meanwhile, defence expenditure has increased from 4.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1985 to 4.9 per cent in 2002 (World Bank 2005). In 2004, the state's defence expenditure almost equalled welfare spending, with 19 per cent of current government spending going into defence while 21 per cent went into social welfare provision (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2004).

2 Although a growing number of women are entering union leadership positions in northern countries, the dominance of the ICFTU's 'old' internationalism maintains male-biased bureaucratic organizations engaged in economic unionism strategies. In projecting Eurocentric Anglo-Saxon type labour relations into countries of the South, the ICFTU's labour internationalism continues to ignore the movement politics of unions as actors in civil society (Lambert 2002; Waterman 2004). This 'internationalism from above' is increasingly contested by the Global Justice Movement (GJM) which articulates a space of global civil society (Waterman 2004). While the PSUNU is also marginally linked with the GJM, through its affiliation to the PSI, there is little interest or awareness of it at local levels.

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6 Bangladesh

Women and labour activism

Shahidur Rahman

Women did not play a significant role in Bangladeshi labour organizations until the 1980s, not least because women were seldom allowed to engage in paid work outside the home due to patriarchal, social and religious values. The subsequent emergence of the garment industry has made it possible for women to become involved in the labour market by reducing restrictions on their access to the public sphere. Since the 1980s, the garment industry has played the central role in Bangladesh's export sector and has become a major source of foreign exchange. It currently exports about five billion dollars' worth of products each year and directly employs 1.8 million workers, of whom 80 per cent are women (Hoque 2004). The industry provided Bangladeshi women with their first opportunity to become active trade union members.

The nature of unions in low-wage countries, and women's position within those unions, cannot be divorced from developments at the global level. While union membership enabled workers in advanced capitalist countries to increase their wages during the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, rising unemployment levels in the 1970s and 1980s – the result of capital flight – placed workers and trade unions in a defensive role in many industrialized countries. In short, union power first gave management an incentive to relocate, and then union weakness gave the management full control over the restructuring of production processes (Cox 1987). The relocation of production from high-wage to low-wage countries has encouraged Third-World countries to adopt the policy of export-oriented industrialization.

There has been debate over the impact of this strategy on the role of women in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh. Some scholars argue that the global integration of Bangladesh's garment industry has empowered women and helped them gain respect within a male-dominated society (Kabeer 2000; Paul-Majumder 2001). However, others have argued that externally dependent industrialization has left women workers in a vulnerable position. In some industrializing countries, the union movement has remained weak due to the strict control of labour by the state. Deyo argues that 'the establishment of authoritarian controls over labour in many East and Southeast Asian countries prior to the adoption of export-led industrialization ... curtailed the possibility of effective labour movements developing in the region' (cited in Hadiz 2001:

110). In addition to state control, the lack of job security and employers' negative attitudes towards unions have restricted the development of labour organizing, as employers lobby the government for cheap labour, weak labour protection regimes and powerless unions. As a result, in Bangladesh and other industrializing countries, the textile and clothing industry – an industry that employs predominantly young female workers – offers conditions that recall those of the sweatshops and mills of nineteenth-century Europe and North America (Robert 1983; Dicken 1998).

These obstacles have hindered the progress of trade unions and, in some contexts, given rise to suggestions that non-union employee organizations such as workers' councils, non-union employee participation and welfare committees are better able to provide protection for workers, particularly women. Proponents of non-union employee representation assert that:

> Union[s] hindered efficiency through restrictive work rules and strikes, fostered adversarialism between the employer and employees, and union leaders were prone to engage in undemocratic and corrupt practices. The company union was ... a superior means to achieve industrial democracy because it provided workers with formal channels for voice while at the same time it avoided adversarialism and strikes associated with representation by an outside 'third party'.
>
> (Kaufman and Kleiner 1993: 2)

Kaufman and Kleiner do acknowledge, however, that unions have some advantages over non-union representation, including freedom from control by the management. They concede that the rank and file choose trade union leaders and that unions have created a space that puts muscle behind the collective voice through strikes. They also note that unions are also more effective than non-union employee representation in dealing with economic issues such as wages and lay-offs (Kaufman and Kleiner 1993). Freeman and Rogers (1993) argue that in theory, non-union forms of employee representation such as works councils can be effective, but only if they have the backing of the state to ensure they have a clearly defined role in wage bargaining and sufficient power to achieve their demands. In reality, these issues are difficult to resolve, as employers rarely give workers sufficient power to adequately represent their interests. Thus, unions remain more efficient than non-union alternatives (Freeman and Rogers 1993).

This chapter compares one Bangladeshi union that is dominated by women – the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF) – with a company-initiated welfare committee. This chapter begins with an overview of women's participation in the paid labour market and the impact of the development of the garment industry on the status of women. It then discusses BIGUF, the factors that encouraged its formation and the challenges women face as union members. The next section of this chapter contrasts BIGUF – an independent, non-political union, where the majority of members

are women and women control the executive body – with a welfare committee introduced by the owner of a Bangladeshi garment company in order to avoid the establishment of a trade union.[1] The comparison of these very different models of labour organization in the garment industry in Bangladesh suggests that there the welfare committee model offers no real substitute for unions when it comes to protecting women workers' rights.

Women in Bangladeshi society and the garment industry

The lives of women in Bangladesh are dominated by a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal social system (Asian Development Bank 2001). There is an attitude prevalent in Bangladeshi society that men are responsible for productive work and women are entirely dependent on them (Khan 1988). Women are expected to maintain the family, taking responsibility for child-rearing and other domestic activities. Rural women also help their families in processing agricultural crops after cultivation – under the roof of their own home. Indeed, until recently, women were physically confined to their homes and excluded from the public sphere of fields, markets, roads and towns (Chen 1995), establishing a sharp sexual division of labour through socio-economic inequality which affects every aspect of women's lives.

This traditional division of labour along gender lines is reinforced at the ideological level. As Westergaard (1983) notes, the dominant social ideologies in Bangladesh are deeply related to the Muslim religion. Conservative sections of society promote religious values and social norms relegate women employees to positions of invisibility and passivity by emphasizing that they should observe *purdah*, which means curtain or veil.[2] In other words, women are not expected to be seen by males outside the family domain. The practice of *purdah* excludes women from the labour market. In addition to restrictions on the participation of women in the social arena imposed by the family, women's freedom is also limited by the local community. Social institutions, such as *shamaj* (a community that acts as a guardian of the social and moral order recognizing reciprocal rights and obligations) and *shalish* (an informal village court), are also responsible for the low participation of women in the labour market (Kabeer 2000). These village-level institutions impose powerful constraints preventing women from taking up paid work.

These social and ideological constraints on women's participation in the labour movement meant that Bangladeshi women's share of total paid employment was only 5 per cent in 1967 (World Bank 1990). However, during the 1970s, landlessness, poverty and famine propelled women into the labour market. Chen (1995) argues that the famine of 1974 forced women outside the home in search of work after migrants from rural areas flooded the streets of the major cities in search of food. In response, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) introduced an experimental food-for-work programme for women in Mymensingh, a district suffering from famine. UNICEF anticipated that around 100 women would participate in this programme, but surprisingly 840 women took part (Chen 1995). Inspired by UNICEF's actions, the Bangladesh govern-

ment introduced food-for-work schemes throughout the country in 1975 at a time when the participation of women outside the home was still a new phenomenon. Although large numbers of women sought to participate in the government programmes, local officials turned women away in favour of men. In addition, they paid women less than the male participants (Chen 1995). The government responded to this unmet need by introducing and promoting large-scale paid employment for women through a third food-for-work programme, which involved over 95,000 women by the late 1980s (Chen 1995).

Non-government organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh have worked to empower women and promote their participation in the labour market. NGOs addressing women's issues have developed different programmes, sponsored by aid agencies, to break with traditions and involve women in income-generating activities. They have promoted the self-employment of women through rural credit and women have used the credit made available to them to establish self-employment activities, including poultry farming, fishing and nursery gardens. Schuler and Hashemi (1994) found that participation in the credit programme of the Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) – two major NGOs in Bangladesh – is positively associated with women's level of empowerment. According to Chen (1995), the female labour force rose threefold from 900,000 to 2.7 million between 1961 and 1985 as a consequence of these kinds of programmes.

Chen argues that the NGOs' activities promoted women's participation in the paid labour market. However, Kabeer claims that despite the expansion of their efforts, the direct impact of NGOs on women's labour force participation remained marginal until the garment industry drew women into the paid labour market on a significant scale after a decade of failure of government and NGO programmes (Kabeer 2000). Bangladesh's textile and clothing industry has become a billion-dollar industry within two decades. It is the main export sector and a major source of foreign exchange. The rapid expansion of the garment industry is remarkable, given the history of the nation. Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971 after nine months of war that destroyed the economy. It was a major task for the government to rebuild the country; a task that became more difficult as the government adopted an import-substitution policy. At the same time, the demand for jute fibre, once an important export commodity, declined significantly in the world market.

Conditions in the early days of the garment industry were unfavourable. However, higher growth in the industry was later achieved because of changes in global policy. The introduction of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) in particular opened up the market for Bangladeshi products.[3] The former Asian Tigers, which had been major exporters of garments, moved production to countries like Bangladesh under subcontracting arrangements or joint ventures. At the same time, the Bangladeshi government reformed domestic policy and liberalized trade restrictions, creating a more favourable environment for the Bangladeshi garment industry. Export garment earnings were less than US$1 million in the 1970s but rose to US$1,182.57 million in 1991–2. By the end of

Table 6.1 Participation indicators of women's employment in Bangladesh, 1999–2000

Indicator	*%*
Total labour force participation rate	54.9
Male labour force participation rate	84.0
Female labour force participation rate	23.9
Female's employees as percentage of employment in administrative positions	0.6
Female's share as percentage of employment in technical professions	3.2
Female's share as percentage of employment in clerical positions	6.1
Female's share as percentage of employment in sales	17.0
Female's share as percentage of employment in services	3.2
Female's share as percentage of employment in production and transport	19.9
Female's share as percentage of employment in agriculture	47.7
Female's share as percentage of employment in non-agriculture	52.3

Source: Adapted from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2005).

2003, Bangladesh's export garment earnings had risen to US$5,686.09 million (Mlachila and Yang 2004; Siddiqi 2004). The average growth rate to the end of 2000-1 was 17.11 per cent; an exceptionally high growth rate for any industry anywhere in the world (Export Promotion Bureau 2003).

The subsequent mushrooming of garment factories in the cities was a major factor behind the changing pattern of female labour force participation (see Table 6.1). Most workers in the garment industry are women who migrated from villages to cities in search of jobs. By the mid-1990s, the garment industry alone accounted for 69 per cent of total female employment in the large-scale industrial sector (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 1994).

Some gender-related factors have been influential in encouraging garment employers to hire more women than men in their firms (Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000). Kabeer interviewed garment manufacturers in a study in which she explored the reasons for employer's preference for female labour:

> We started with only men in our workforce ... they were sacked with three months' benefits and we brought women in. First of all, as helpers, then they learnt the work and replaced the men. Why women? Because men smoke, drink tea and talk a lot, disturb everybody ... they are very vociferous, demand holidays, they have tough friends, football fans ... no discipline. We want as little talk as possible on the machines. There is no problem if they confine their talk to the lunch hour. That is something women are prepared to do. Men in groups will immediately start agitating for more pay. Women go straight home after work because of domestic responsibilities or because it gets dark. Women listen better and they don't talk back. Men won't take instructions or accept authority easily. And women are cheaper because they have fewer choices – in terms of physical location of work and in terms of their physical ability to do different kinds of work.
>
> (Kabeer 2000: 71–2)

Working-class women choose to enter the garment industry because it offers better conditions than alternative forms of employment available to them in Bangladesh. Kabeer has identified four different groups of women who have entered the garment factories. One group of women came from poor households and worked in domestic service or in small workshops or factory units before joining the garment industry. A second group chose garment jobs in response to specific events such as the death of a husband or father, divorce or collapse of the family business. The third group of women entered the industry in order to improve their living standards or their children's prospects. The fourth group of women explained their entry into the garment industry in terms of earning money for their own needs, such as saving money for a dowry.

All four groups of women believed that garment industry employment was preferable to other forms of employment available to women of their class. These women asserted that paid work in the garment industry empowered them and gave them societal respect, overcame their pervasive poverty and the social exploitation they experienced in their village life and provided them with hope for leading decent lives. The question remains, however, whether these women workers were empowered by taking an active part in a trade union. The remainder of this chapter addresses this question by evaluating different modes of labour organizing in Bangladesh and the position of women in those particular forms of labour organization.

Women and labour organizing

In the 1980s, unions worldwide began developing strategies to recruit women members. Since the 1990s, the involvement of women has become a major concern in the development of labour organizing in Bangladesh, as the increasing numbers of women employees in the garment industry failed to translate into an increased presence of women in unions. A survey conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) in 1993 found that among 97 women garment workers, only 3.3 per cent of women had joined unions while 21.2 per cent of women employed in other industries were union members (Paul-Majumder 2002). The dominant and discriminatory role of male workers in the workplace has served as an obstacle for the unionization of female workers. Cultural constraints have proved an obstacle in the organization of women workers. In line with religious and social values, female workers submit to the authority of male workers, accept harsh treatment by their male employers and lack the confidence to take a leading role in unions – even at times are afraid of joining a union (Rock 2001). And where they became union members, women have been afraid to raise their voice and are seen by men to be ineffective in strike situations.

On the one hand, then, women's involvement in unions is low – less than 1 per cent of the total unionized members in the garment sector – considering the growth of the garment industry.[4] However, on the other hand, given the history of women in Bangladesh, it is encouraging that women can now at least think

about raising their collective voices. In short, while the progress of women in unions has been slow, it is not disappointing when prevailing social and economic conditions are considered, especially in a context where the rate of unionization among workers as a whole is still less than 5 per cent, with only 1.9 million out of a total 53.5 million of working people in unions (Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies 2005).

The position of unions in Bangladeshi society has been strongly influenced by the country's political history. After achieving independence in 1971, the new government nationalized all the country's key industries. During this decade, the jute industry was the motor of industrialization and unions developed gradually among jute workers. Labour organizations involving jute mill workers included a number of national labour federations such as the Bangladesh *Chatkal Sramik* Federation, the Bangladesh *Sramik* Federation, the Bangladesh Trade Union Centre and the Bangladesh *Jatiya Srmaik* Federation (Islam 1983).

The trade union movement is marked by direct interference by the government and the ruling party in its internal affairs. Since independence, Bangladeshi unions have maintained a strong alliance with political parties. Indeed, each of the three main political parties has its own trade union federation, which collectively account for 64 per cent of the unionized workers (Azam and Salmon 1997). This trend was enshrined in a 1977 government regulation requiring that each political party has a labour organization of its own (Nurullah 1993). As a result, a good number of unions came into being with goals that were not related to the rights of workers. Rather, these unions were formed to serve the interests of the political parties and to strengthen the influence of particular party ideologies amongst workers. This has contributed to the development of a patron–client relationship between union leaders and ruling elites. The power-holders use unions, and in return union leaders obtain different kinds of services from the political parties. As Khan (2002: 183) argues:

> The admixture of booty capitalism and patron-clientelism has created particular types of ruling elite in Bangladesh, known as neo-patrimonial, in which the power holders' arbitrary will has often become intermeshed with legal-rational organizations. This has, in effect, encouraged rent-seeking behaviour on the part of the ruling elite by granting special privileges to politically influential actors such as trade union leaders in big public sector organizations who, in return, have served as support bases for those ruling elites both at local and national level.

Under this system, the number of registered trade unions increased dramatically. In 1972, there were 1,160 unions with 450,606 members. By the new millennium, there were 5,319 unions with approximately 1.7 million members (Paratian and Torres 2001). In 2004, there were a total number of 6,492 workers' and employers' unions in Bangladesh, and union membership totalled more than two million (for workers' unions, see Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Trade union membership in Bangladesh, December 2004

National Trade Union Federations	31
Number of Trade Unions	5,242
Trade Union Members	1,969,614

Source: Adapted from Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies (2005).

Among the national federations in Bangladesh, five are affiliated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) (Grumiau 2005). In the garment sector, there are four prominent trade unions: the National Garment Workers' Federation, the Bangladesh Garment Workers' Federation, the Bangladesh Garment Workers Employees' Federation and the BIGUF.

The BIGUF

As noted earlier, women in the garment industry were initially reluctant to join unions. However, as working conditions deteriorated in the garment industry, women were forced to organize in order to improve their situation (Kabeer 2000; Rock 2001). Worker consciousness-raising was conducted 'underground'. Each worker belonged to a group based on region or ethnicity. Those groups were used to discuss issues such as the attitudes of employers, aspects of factory life, wages, increasingly long working hours and the few opportunities for days off. These discussions continued as they shared experiences with other groups at social gatherings (Rock 2001).

Some NGOs, women's groups and human rights groups including UBINIG (Women for Alternative Policy Development), *Karmajibi Nari* (Working Women) and *Nari Uddog Kendra* (Centre for Women Initiatives) also organized seminars and workshops to inform female workers of their rights (Rock 2001) and to build their confidence and organizing capacity. Alongside the local NGOs, international bodies including the American Center for International Labor Solidarity [ACILS, formerly the Asia American Free Labour Institute (AAFLI)][5] and the ICFTU offered training for workers (Rock 2001). Collaboration between local and international organizations in providing health centres, libraries, seminars and discussions on the rights of women helped female garment workers to survive in a male-dominated society (Rock 2001).

The impact of NGOs and international labour organizations on women's participation in unions was most visible in the formation of BIGUF in the mid-1990s. BIGUF, then known as the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGU), operated as an independent union from 1994 before registering as a national federation and assuming its current name in 1999 (Rock 2001). Twenty-four factory unions are affiliated with BIGUF, which has a membership in excess of 50,000 workers in the cities of Dhaka and Chittagong. ACILS played a pivotal role during the formation of BIGUF, which is a member of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF). Other assistance came from Fawzia Karim Firoze, a well-known human rights lawyer.[6]

BIGUF differs from other Bangladeshi unions in two ways. First, it is not aligned with any political party; second, women comprise the majority of its members. BIGUF is also the only union in Bangladesh operating in the garment sector whose leadership is comprised largely of women. Of the 25 members on the executive committee, 20 are women, including the president and the general secretary. Unlike other union federations in Bangladesh, BIGUF is a union whose policies and practices centre on workers' needs, without interference from political organizations. Importantly, BIGUF insists that its union officials must have work experience in the garment industry in order to understand the importance of unions' efforts to protect workers in the face of oppression. This expectation stands in contrast to other unions in Bangladesh, the majority of whose officials are men with close links with the garment manufacturers and without work experience in factories (Rock 2001).

Alternative strategies: non-union representation in Bantai industries

Until its demise in 2005, women garment workers at Bantai Industries Private Limited had access not to a union, but to a non-union labour organization, specifically a welfare committee. Bantai, a joint-venture company established in 1990 with a Taiwanese partner, grew significantly during the 1990s. The company was lauded by the government for introducing enlightened or 'high-road' work practices,[7] which it pursued until it closed in 2005 after its success was undermined by the transfer of foreign investment out of Bangladesh, as foreign investors anticipated the phasing out of the MFA in 2005 and took advantage of the opportunities offered by relocation to China.

Bantai's welfare committee was established in 1992 to provide a 'voice' for workers. Welfare committees are not used widely in Bangladesh as a whole but are quite common in the export processing zones (EPZs). However, welfare committees in other companies do not function in the same way as the welfare committee did at Bantai.[8] Bantai's management style may be regarded as 'modern paternalist' (Purcell and Ahlstrand cited in Deery *et al.* 2001: 191) because the employer embraced a welfare-oriented approach to workers and established a relationship with employee representatives. The Managing Director, Saidur Rahman, believed that if the employees were treated well by their employer, then they would have a greater commitment to the organization. He sought to produce a harmonious working relationship within the company by introducing welfare programmes for employees.

Saidur Rahman argued that workers were also empowered by Bantai's welfare programmes:

> I think any practice that will empower workers is best practice and for me welfare is the vehicle not the aim. Other factories may have medical centres or day care facilities and this is their aim. But my objective is to empower workers through the provision of such programs. Other factories' focus on

> service delivery, but long-term this is no achievement. Suppose you provide air conditioning in the factory, when they return home their husband[s] tortures them. So what is the overall benefit? I want to develop a workforce who can face the exploitative forces in society.
>
> (Interview January 2004)

Bantai's welfare programmes included instituting a health project, seminars on family planning, a crèche, an education centre for the workers' children where they could attend until grade five, a savings scheme, a fair-priced shop selling daily basic needs and entertainment programmes. New recruits to Bantai were provided with a health card on which their detailed health history was recorded. In addition, a woman doctor from Dhaka Community Hospital was retained on contract by Bantai to visit the factory on a weekly basis to provide any treatment, advice and guidance required by the workers. Basic awareness, advice and guidance about family planning were given to the workers of Bantai by a professional NGO called Concerned Women for Family Planning.

Bantai's welfare committee, which comprised 17 members, was thus designed by the management to 'take care' of the workers. Management selected the membership of the committee from workers in each section of the factory on the basis of a worker's efficiency. Workers did not choose the committee members, nor did the committee define its own mandate. Workers from each of the four sections brought their issues to their section representative who was a member of the welfare committee. The representatives took these issues to the welfare committee, which in turn passed the matters to the supervisors of the factory's different sections. After discussion with the supervisors, the committee discussed the issues with the management, advocating on behalf of the workers. For example, Munni, a female garment worker, had been a member of the welfare committee for four years. One day, her colleague Amera developed appendicitis while at work. The members of the committee talked with the management and succeeded in collecting enough money from the company to cover the cost of the operation Amera required.

The committee claimed that it was independent, and following discussion with the worker concerned, it was prepared to take action against the management (including strike action) if the issues it raised were ignored. Over the life of the committee, there had been no case in which action had been taken against the management. Yet despite its conciliatory style, the committee had been successful in gaining a number of advances. For example, working hours were adjusted so that work started at 7.30 a.m. and finished at 4.30 p.m., with a one-hour lunch break. The factory was open six days a week and all workers received a rest day each week. During major festivals, the factory remained closed for seven days even though the government holiday lasted only three, and two bonuses, amounting to half a worker's salary, were paid to employees for two major festivals per year. For the workers, the most important feature of management regime at Bantai was that they received a fixed salary. Tara, a Bantai employee, states, 'we get our salary [in a] timely [manner] which is very

important for us. The landlords prefer to rent homes to Bantai workers because we get our salary on time' (interview December 2003).

The Bantai welfare committee versus BIGUF

Compared to non-union employee representation, unions are more successful in raising remuneration levels (Freeman and Rogers 1993; Kaufman and Kleiner 1993), which they see as the key issue for workers, while issues such as day care are often given a lower priority. In the Bangladeshi context, the difference between male-dominated unions and female-dominated unions on issues like these, which are of particular concern to women, is significant. Grumiau's study for the ICFTU (2005) revealed that trade union leaders in Bangladesh's textiles and clothing sector are not aware of, and have failed to prioritize, the problems of the workers. For instance, day care is identified as an issue that is important to garment workers, because majority of the babies born to garment workers in Bangladesh miss two of the most important formative mother–child bonding through breastfeeding and the physical touch of their mothers. In the absence of day care facilities, lactating mothers often have no other option when seeking paid work than to leave their children in the care of their mothers-in-law, who may reside in distant villages. Mainstream unions in Bangladesh have not concerned themselves with this issue, with the exception of BIGUF. In contrast, the welfare committee at Bantai prioritized these issues. Hajera Begum, a member of the welfare committee, believed that one of the reasons women sought employment at Bantai was its company day care facility. This suggests that Bantai's workers' representatives possessed more awareness of workers' needs than mainstream union officials.

In addition to the problems of the existing trade unions, Paul-Majumder (2002) has identified another possible reason why women themselves may prefer a welfare committee structure – that many women workers are not familiar with industrial relations and issues related to jobs, including job security, appropriate wages, labour law, ethics at work, compensation and other services. She argues that in underdeveloped countries such as Bangladesh, women workers do not have the confidence to take leadership roles within a union:

> Workers feel free if they organize themselves without outsiders. When they develop leadership in the welfare committee they can join a trade union. In my opinion, a union is important but not at the level when labourers have an underdeveloped worker consciousness. In the welfare committee they will gain a leadership role, will develop a worker consciousness and after that they will be able to create a union among themselves, without the help of outsiders.
>
> (Interview January 2004)

The employers' attitude towards unions also has a significant impact on whether a workplace has a union or a welfare committee. The encouragement or avoid-

ance of unions can be influenced by economic factors such as productivity advantages. Peetz (1998) argues that if non-unionized firms gain greater productivity benefits over unionized firms, employers are likely to avoid unions. He also notes that employers are also likely to discourage unions if market changes reduce union power. This is borne out by the experience in Bangladesh, where employers are criticized by local and global trade unions for avoiding unionization. Employers worldwide also cite the 'outsiderness' of trade unions as their reason for blocking the establishment of an autonomous worker organization in the workplace. As Bantai's general manager remarked:

> We preferred a welfare committee rather than a trade union. We know that a trade union is good but the question is who runs it and do they really work for their members? The leaders of trade unions have no knowledge of the industrial law and labour law. For employers, if there is a fair trade union practice we don't have any problem but we face a lot of problems with trade unions. Most of the union members are outsiders to the factory. In Bangladesh the first action a trade union takes is to call a strike but in law it is the last step. For many of the problems we face we feel it is not necessary to go on strike. If we can provide freedom in the workplace and freedom of association then why do we need a trade union?
>
> (Interview January 2004)

Conversely, although the emergence of welfare committees in Bangladesh's garment industry is explained by the lack of awareness amongst unions about women's issues, welfare committees have been criticized strongly by union leaders. While acknowledging the benefits provided at Bantai through its welfare committee, the general secretary of the National Garment Workers Federation stated:

> We have no objection about the welfare committee that exists in Bantai. But there is no alternative to [a] trade union. If you want to improve labour standard, wage, other facilities you can't avoid [a] trade union. There may be criticisms of trade unions in Bangladesh over their relations with political parties, or that they may be corrupt but not all aspects of trade unions are totally mixed up with politics. Like the welfare committee of Bantai you can find this form in the EPZ, but we know this is not the same. The Bantai employer is an exceptional man who really thinks of his workers and he is cooperating with the welfare committee. But what is happening in EPZ in the name of welfare committees is total eyewash.
>
> (Interview December 2003)

Another problem of alternative union strategies such as welfare committees is that this type of organization isolates workers from other workers in the industry and so prevents the formation of class solidarity and a class identity. The case study presented here indicates that while the welfare committee succeeded in

providing services for workers under the benevolent eye of the management, in contrast to BIGUF, it in no way empowered women. In her analysis, Paul-Majumder (2002) asserts that women workers do not gain an understanding of class struggle through the material conditions of their working life. However, these assumptions are contradicted by BIGUF's achievements in organizing garment workers through seminars and discussions on the rights of women as citizens and workers and the provision of legal and medical assistance for workers.[9] In order to raise workers' awareness of labour laws, every member of BIGUF is issued with a copy of the union's constitution, union officials inform workers of their industrial rights, and BIGUF lawyers actively advocate on behalf of the union's members. In this way, union members in BIGUF are empowered in ways that are not evident in the services provided by Bantai's welfare committee.

Broader issues that directly affect female garment workers are not identified and challenged by non-union representation. For instance, workers at Bantai failed to oppose the end of the quota system in the garment industry, even though the impending phasing out of the MFA in 2005 led to the demise of Bantai Industries in 2005.[10] In contrast, other actors – including BIGUF – have come forward to produce a constructive strategy for the continued existence of the Bangladeshi garment industry in the global market, understanding the necessity of forming a comprehensive policy to ensure the competitiveness of the garment industry. BIGUF organized an open discussion in Chittagong in 2005 where a panel representing both the ruling and opposition parties discussed the garment sector's situation and made recommendations to overcome the adverse impacts of quota phase-out and called for the proper implementation of labour laws and existing rules to ensure workers' rights. By organizing this type of discussion, BIGUF has significantly contributed to the survival of the industry, and in doing so empowered its members in a way that non-union employee representation such as welfare committees cannot.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, women's involvement in unions is more visible in the garment industry than in other sectors of the economy, and since the 1990s the number of women union members has slowly increased. BIGUF in particular is working not only to ensure that the rights of workers, especially women, are respected, but to make workers aware of those rights. In contrast, the case study of Bantai demonstrates that the non-union welfare committee prevented workers from developing an independent voice and did not allow workers to control their own representative organization. A whole range of factors including the political orientation of unions, the wide gap between union leaders and workers and their subsequent reluctance or inability to mobilize the working class, union leaders' lack of awareness of women's workplace problems, and – above all – the impact of a variety of cultural factors have created an opportunity for garment manufacturers to force non-union alternatives onto their largely female workforce. In

order to ensure women's active participation in trade unions, unions need to inspire workers to become actively involved in the labour movement. To do this, women workers need to be convinced that unions are an important avenue for achieving workplace and social change for women as well as men.

Notes

1 The research on which this chapter is based consists of focus groups, semi-structured interviews and documentary research. As a part of the case study of Bantai Industries Private Limited, garment workers of Bantai took part in the focus groups involving around 75 workers. The focus group participants were selected on the basis of the length of time they had worked with the company. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with the managing director of the company, the general manager of the company, one union representative and the president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporter Association. In addition, I examined all the documents of the company and looked at the government's terms and policy in the garment sector such as labour law, minimum wage structure and working conditions.

2 According to Chen (1995: 40), '*purdah* involves the seclusion of women within the boundaries of their homes and the veiling of women outside their homes'. The existence of *purdah* is more visible in the rural areas: it no longer serves as an obstacle for women to work in urban areas. For a detailed discussion of *purdah*, see Kabeer (2000).

3 'The MFA contains a series of bilaterally-negotiated quota restrictions covering trade in textiles and clothing between developed and developing countries' (Trela and Whalley 1990: 13). Under the quota, the exporter is allowed to supply a certain volume of textile and clothing products, and the amount of quota is negotiated between the importing and exporting countries. The MFA meant that individual importing countries could choose which products to restrict from which countries.

4 It is difficult to ascertain the number of union members in Bangladesh. Grumiau's 2005 report finds less than 1 per cent of the workforce belonging to a union in the garment sector. As more than 80 per cent of the workers in this sector are women, it may be proposed that less than 1 per cent of the women garment workers have joined unions in the garment sector.

5 The ACILS, formerly AAFLI, is the international arm of the American Labor Federation–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO). ACILS launched its programme in Bangladesh in 1973 in the area of labour organization and social development. In contrast, the ICFTU cooperates closely with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and has consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council and with specialized agencies such as UNESCO. ICFTU is a historical rival of ACILS (Rock 2001).

6 In an interview with Rock (2001), Firoze revealed that she was actively involved in the legal counselling of garment workers to ensure they had access to the legal system and could avail themselves of coverage under the relevant labour laws.

7 'High-road' means the implementation of good practices in the workplace such as safe and secure working conditions, good wages, different workers' benefits and a friendly relationship between employees and management and other services for the workers.

8 Until 2005, there had been no unions in the EPZs in order to attract the investors. But the US government has pressured Bangladesh to allow trade unions in the EPZs. As a result, in 2005, the government permitted the formation of welfare committees rather than trade unions.

9 With the help of the ACILS, the union has opened its own schools. BIGUF also runs remedial classes for workers over 14 years of age who missed the chance to attend

school. This is a unique opportunity for them to become literate and to learn more about workers' rights.

10 After more than 40 years of restrictions, the textile and clothing sector has become subject to the general rules of the GATT from 1 January 2005, as a new agreement is made up to phase out the MFA known as the 'Agreement on Textiles and Clothing' (ATC).

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7 Thailand

Women and spaces for labour organizing

Andrew Brown and Saowalak Chaytaweep

A defining feature of Thailand's industrialization experience since the 1960s, and especially during the economic boom years between 1985 and 1995, has been the incorporation of millions of young, single, rural migrant women into the wage-labour relation across industry, manufacturing, services and informal sectors (Mills 1999). By the late 1980s, almost four million women formed the vast majority of the workforce in the labour-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing sectors that were the main drivers of growth. By the early 1990s, 80 per cent of all workers in Thailand's ten leading export industries were women (Dotson 2005: 6). Over the same period, hundreds of thousands of other women were employed in the numerous shopping malls, department stores, restaurants, cinemas and entertainment areas, as well as in the burgeoning informal sector through subcontracting, household labour and piece work. Clearly, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of the economic contributions that feminized wage-labour has made to Thailand's transformation from the largely agricultural economy and society it was 30 or 40 years ago to the rapidly industrializing and globally engaged country it is today.

Although industrial and work ethnographies have been limited, there is enough evidence to show that working life for women in Thailand's manufacturing sectors has been characterized by many of those features found elsewhere in Southeast Asia: low wages, monotonous and repetitive tasks, limited career paths and the absence of opportunity for skilling and further education and training. More often, women work as production operators on assembly lines, rather than supervisors or managers, where they confront unsafe and unhealthy working conditions and where sexual and other forms of harassment are not uncommon. Women have also been the first to bear the brunt of lay-offs following economic downturns and have been consistently disadvantaged as a result of casualization and subcontracting, which translates into increased job insecurity and lack of legal and social welfare protections. In sum, lower wages, long hours, strict managerial discipline combined with the additional pressures that stem from reproductive and household roles has typified the experience of millions of young Thai women as they have entered into and endured the industrialization process.

Challenged by these conditions, Thai women workers have demonstrated

that they are neither passive nor docile victims. Rather, through the mid-1970s and especially during the 1980s and early 1990s, women became involved in numerous strikes, rallies, street demonstrations, marches and other forms of labour protests aimed at rectifying numerous workplace grievances and indignities (Mills 2005). These recurring, if somewhat sporadic and ephemeral, episodes of grass-roots labour activism occurred, however, at precisely the time when Thailand's state-sanctioned trade unionism was weakening as a result of rapid structural change and its penetration by military, business and bureaucratic forces. In the private sector, those trade unions that survived the right-wing backlash of the 1976–9 period became increasingly subordinated to, and ensnared within, a rigid system of bureaucratic rules and regulations that limited their activities to enterprise-focused 'bread-and-butter' issues. Although state enterprise unions remained strong, leadership was dominated largely by men who were often engaged in factional struggles within their own unions and with rival unions, especially over issues of membership coverage. State enterprise unions and their leadership had by the end of the 1980s also become enmeshed in political infighting between cliques of military, business and politicians that centred mainly, although not exclusively, around issues of privatization. This compromised both their autonomy and their capacity to effectively represent the full range of worker interests. Peak labour councils had also become fragmented, penetrated and undermined and were also led largely by males who, often in league with non-labour interests, competed for sources of both domestic and external funding that was used for the dispensing of patronage, building status and also for self-enrichment (Prakanphruk 1988; Brown 2004: 89–105).

By the early 1990s, women workers were thus doubly marginalized: as workers they had few effective avenues through which they could seek collective redress for their grievances, and within those avenues that did exist, they confronted a trade union movement that was dominated by males, penetrated by outside influences, pursued a limited and economistic focus and consistently displayed little interest in developing strategies and tactics responsive to the particular needs and interests of a rapidly expanding feminized workforce. In this context, it is unsurprising that by the late 1980s and early 1990s, some of the most significant labour-organizing efforts began to emerge outside the political spaces of officially sanctioned trade unionism. As Naphaphon (1993: 128–30) has noted, the emergence of these groups needs to be understood as a response to the general ineffectiveness of the officially sanctioned and legally registered labour movement and the political space that this was permitted to occupy.

Against this background, the present chapter reflects upon the efforts of women to expand the political spaces for labour organizing in Thailand, through a particular focus on the activism and experiences of women involved in the Thai Kriang Textile Union (TKTU), the Thai Labour Solidarity Committee (TLSC) and the Thai Labour Campaign (TLC), a labour-affiliated non-government organization (NGO) established in early 2000. We wish to draw

attention to the ways in which women's activism within these organizations contributed to the establishment and development of a more socially and politically engaged labour movement that has stretched the restrictive boundaries that the state has attempted to impose upon collective expressions of labour struggles. We begin by outlining the recent history of the Thai trade union movement drawing particular attention to its industrial and political marginalization. We then discuss the activism of the TKTU which operated for over 20 years to improve working conditions for its members and became a model for other unions in the textiles industry. The TKTU and its leadership also became involved in leading a range of broader campaigns, most notably the campaign for paid maternity leave as well as for improved workplace health and safety. Its recent defeat and dissolution illustrates the difficulties that have confronted Thailand's trade union movement as a whole in the wake of the 1997–8 Economic Crisis. We then examine the emergence of alternative vehicles for labour organizing with a focus on the TLC which was established and led by one of the new generation of female labour activists. We argue that the TLC has contributed to the opening up of new spaces for labour activism, which aim to overcome the continuing limitations of state-sanctioned, nationally focused trade unionism. We conclude by drawing together some of the main themes and arguments of this chapter, emphasizing that women's activism has been pivotal in sustaining and revitalizing political spaces for labour organizing, and which provides important insights into the shifting and changing forms that Thailand's labour movement has taken over the recent past.

The political marginalization of organized labour

Since the 1970s, labour activism in Thailand has concentrated on three related areas. First, struggles over wages and conditions, including attempts to address long working hours, inadequate remuneration, poor health and safety standards and limited social welfare coverage. Second, workers have been involved in a range of political campaigns including opposition to privatization, the renewal of industrial relations legislation and attempts to promote democratization and reform the government. Third, there have been efforts to effectively utilize the legal and industrial rights that, in theory at least, provide an avenue for workers to participate and be represented in workplaces and wider social and political arenas. During the 1980s and until 1997, each of these arenas of struggle was embedded within the developing system of parliamentary rule. The irony of this, however, is that expanding political space did not encourage the greater involvement of workers either in workplace bargaining or in the formal arena of party politics, nor did it promote markedly enhanced organizational capacities within the labour movement. Rather, organized labour has seen an ever-widening gap between state undertakings on reform, rights, equity and participation and the actual practice of workplace relations and electoral politics (Brown 2004).

In part, the dilemma that confronts organized labour is associated with the historical timing of broader processes of political reform. The development of

parliamentary politics from the 1980s onwards occurred in a context of rapid economic expansion that transformed production. Manufacturing and services began to dominate the economy as the shift from import substitution industrialization (ISI) to a more export-oriented strategy saw Thailand become entangled in global patterns of production and trade. Although these changes led to a substantial expansion of the urban industrial segment of the working class, the rapidity of change, upheavals in community and social life, together with increased differentiation and fragmentation of the workforce, posed significant problems for building and sustaining collective labour organization. The marginalized state of organized labour is also, however, the product of the particular character of labour's formal political space as well as an outcome of contests to redefine and limit this space. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the institutions of parliamentary rule and electoral politics became dominated by alliances of urban and provincial businessmen, bureaucrats, politicians and a range of 'predatory interests' known as *chao pho* or godfathers (Wingfield 2002). The capture and subversion of the formal institutions of political representation was consolidated and extended under Thaksin Shinawatra and his *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT) party following their election to government in 2001 (Pasuk and Baker 2004). In a parliamentary system that has become dominated by money politics, vote buying and big business, labour interests have been systematically sidelined, a situation exacerbated by constitutional provisions and electoral laws that effectively disenfranchise large sections of the urban industrial workforce (Robertson 2001).

The sidelining of labour in electoral politics has been mirrored in the industrial arena. Worker attempts to exercise their legal rights to organize and bargain collectively have consistently met with stiff opposition from business, military, bureaucratic and *mafioso*-type interests who have often colluded to thwart the establishment and operation of trade unions, labour federations and labour councils (Brown 2004). Workers also confront problems associated with the character of the space established by key labour laws. The 1975 Labour Relations Act (LRA) provides only narrow avenues for organized labour that, while granting legal status, means that in practice unions, federations and labour councils are captured within a strict regime of processes, rules and regulations. This has limited organizational capacity and has offered employers and the state ample scope to legally undermine labour organizing and industrial action. For example, the state retains the power to reject union registration and to ban strikes. The 1975 LRA also limits every union's ability to effectively represent its members and places them in a weak position compared with employers by disallowing full-time union representation, ruling that union committees must be composed of full-time employees. In sum, through rapid structural change, limited space and the political ascendance of coalitions of interests hostile to labour, Thailand's trade union movement has been unable to effectively represent workers in dealings with employers and governments.

The absence of effective representation in workplaces and broader social and political arenas has had a deleterious impact on workers in general and female

workers in particular. Private sector unions that survived and managed to continue to operate over time have been largely enterprise-based, poorly resourced and limited to a narrow focus on seeking slight improvements in wages and conditions. Lacking the capacity to mobilize large numbers of workers, they have not been able to force their attention on political parties, which, more often than not, have simply ignored unions and urban-based labour interests in the lead up to electoral contests. In this context, those particular problems and pressures experienced by feminized wage-labour such as maternity leave and childcare have received little interest from male-dominated peak union bodies. Moreover, the lack of any effective relationship between unions and political parties has meant that problems faced by women workers have not been taken up as matters of wider social and political debate. Against this background, we turn to an examination of the activism of the TKTU, emphasizing the key role this union played in promoting solidarity around women's issues as well as expanding the spaces for labour activism by developing alliances with non-union organizations.

TKTU and labour's political space

Established by domestic Sino-Thai business interests in 1960, Thai Kriang was one of the earliest and largest textile companies to take advantage of the government's launching of a new development strategy.[1] This was designed to take Thailand away from its then largely agricultural-based economy towards an industrial future built, initially at least, around a programme of ISI. Geographically situated close to the Bangkok Metropolitan Area (BMA) in a tough urban industrial zone that became the site of hundreds of other textile factories, the Thai Kriang workforce was initially comprised largely of men. However, as it continued its operations, the company began to recruit increasingly large numbers of young, single, rural migrant women. This was a measure aimed at reducing labour costs but was also a decision made on the belief that women would be more easily managed and controlled. Despite the absence of minimum wage legislation and little or no government concern for working conditions, Thai Kriang workers fared somewhat better than most during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The textile industry was booming and employers had to compete to secure and retain trained workers. Although there was no right to collectively bargain and while wages were only ten baht (US 50 cents per day), Thai Kriang had to accede to worker demands to have their wages supplemented with food, accommodation, water and electricity. Despite these benefits, Thai Kriang workers nonetheless faced a daily grind of 12-hour working days where they were subjected to strict discipline, forced to work with dangerous machinery and tolerate noise levels that left their ears ringing after every shift.

The period from late 1972 through mid- to late-1975 witnessed an explosion of working-class activism in Thailand. This took the form of over 1,000 strikes, numerous rallies and demonstrations, street marches, sit-ins, factory blockades and, in one famous incident involving women workers employed in the Hara

Jeans factory, the seizure of the means of production and the establishment of a workers' cooperative. Through such activism, and assisted by alliances forged with students, journalists and intellectuals, issues such as poor working and living conditions, below subsistence wage levels, lack of overtime payments and welfare facilities, employer violation of laws and the suppression of worker rights became firmly placed on the nation's political agenda (Brown 2004). It was in this context that future TKTU leaders cut their political teeth and participated in demonstrations and rallies and gained their first exposure to the ideas of labour rights, trade unionism and the linking of workplace grievances with broader social and political problems.

The period from the coup on 6 October 1976 through the end of 1970s was difficult for organized labour as employers, together with military and police intelligence agencies, attempted to break the back of fledgling unions in the private sector. TKTU managed to survive this period, in part because of increased solidarity within the workplace that developed through a number of clashes with management over the inequitable rates of wages and bonuses that were paid to female workers. In 1978, when bonuses were again paid out unequally, 13 women in the factory organized a protest that was supported by the vast majority of the female workforce, although initially 800 men refused to support the women's actions. In 1980, the year that TKTU gained official union registration, the union once again sought increases to the bonuses paid to women. The company refused to negotiate and sacked seven members of the union committee. The employer used a legal loophole to dismiss key union leaders by offering to pay compensation. The union responded by making use of the newly established Labour Court, where they won their case. This case and the perceived lack of justice galvanized the now almost totally feminized rank and file who flocked to join and support the union.

With their added strength, the TKTU engaged in successive campaigns against the management to improve wages and conditions, making creative use of labour laws to protect the union executive during processes of collective bargaining. Another strike in 1981, which was only resolved through the direct intervention of the minister of interior, further bolstered union solidarity and provided the union and its leadership with additional experience which they began to share with other fledgling textile unions in other factories in the area. By the mid-1980s, the union had elected a new leadership under long-time employee Aruni Srito who was to emerge as one of the most talented and influential trade union leaders ever produced by Thailand's working class. Under Aruni, the union fought for the interests of women within the factory over issues of permanency of employment, women's right to take on leadership and supervisory tasks and equal access to technical training.

In 1990, Aruni was elected president of the Thai Federation of Textiles, Clothing and Leather Workers (TFTCLW). Established in the early 1980s, the federation brought together a group of textiles unions located in the Rangsit and Phrapradaeng industrial districts. Under Aruni, the TFTCLW operated as a centre for the exchange of ideas, information and experiences and the planning

of campaigns for gender equality and to improve wages and conditions across the textile industry. At a time when unions across the private sector were being progressively weakened, the TKTU and the TFTCLW had, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, emerged as the key organizational vehicles for representing private sector textile workers in dealing with employers and the government.

Significantly, the TKTU and the TFTCLW also came to occupy a key place within a broader network that emerged involving trade unions from the Omyai-Omnoi industrial area, NGOs, academics and civil liberty groups who began to campaign on a range of issues that impacted on women workers. In 1992, these groups formed the Women Workers' Unity Group (WWUG, *klum buranakan raeng ngan satri*). The group was supported and funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), which shared WWUG concerns for worker rights, social justice, gender equality and the building of international solidarity (Baker *et al.* 2004). Challenging the economism and absence of women's representation within peak labour bodies, the WWUG brought together women workers employed in the textile, metals and electronics industries and operated as a rallying point, forum and resource centre for women workers, providing them with support, information and advice in their dealing with employers, industry groups and the government.

The WWUG operated at the forefront of a number of campaigns that had the effect of blurring the boundaries between economic and broader social and political issues that the Thai state had sought to maintain through the 1975 LRA. One of the first and most important of these was a campaign for 90 days paid maternity leave. Under existing labour law, women in the private sector were allowed 60 days maternity leave of which only 30 days were paid leave. Campaigns to have these allowances increased began in early 1991 after the government extended the amount of paid leave granted to women civil servants. The WWUG began campaigning hard on the issue, basing their arguments on carefully compiled research and employing new tactics targeted at cultivating ties with media and garnering broader public support. The WWUG organized a number of rallies, street marches and demonstrations and were able to pressure the government to accede to their demand for 90 days paid maternity leave, half of which was now to be fully paid (Baker *et al.* 2004: 24–7).

Through its connections with WWUG, the TKTU and its leaders were involved in a range of other campaigns during the early 1990s such as inaugurating annual celebrations in Thailand for International Women's Day, seeking increased protection for migrant workers, agitating for amendment to the 1990 Social Security Act and arguing for the establishment of community-based preschool childcare centres. The TKTU also became integrally involved in the campaign for improved health and safety in the workplace, a campaign that gained momentum following the disastrous fire at Kader Industries in May 1993 that left 188 workers, mostly women, dead and nearly 500 injured (Brown 2001). Problems of workplace health and safety in Thailand have a long history but had been attracting increasing attention in the wake of incidents such as the suspected heavy-metal poisoning of women electronic workers employed at the

Northern Industrial Estate (in Lamphun) and other health problems experienced by textile, construction and other workers (Cadet 1994; Forsyth 1998). These cases were seen to underscore the ineffectiveness of existing trade unions (Nidhi 1993), especially their limited geographical reach, as the operations of the majority of unions were largely confined to the BMA.

The Kader disaster galvanized labour organizing in Thailand and led to the emergence of new organizations within which women assumed important leadership roles. The most important of these new groups was the Committee for the Establishment of Health and Safety (CEHS, *khana kammakan narong phua sukaphap law khwam phlotphai khong khon ngan*). This group emerged out of a coalition of labour federations: the WWUG, the State Enterprise Relations Group, the Labour Council of Thailand, the Thai Trade Union Congress and various NGOs involved in labour affairs, most notably the Friends of Women and the *Ramkhamhaeng* Labour Welfare Group. The CEHS was established in 1994 and was chaired by TKTU President Aruni Srito. CEHS was particularly active in developing a range of health and safety policies, lobbying various state agencies and government ministers, organizing street rallies and marches, arranging seminars and generally ensuring that the problem of health and safety remained firmly on the public agenda and subject to widespread debate (Cadet 1994: 125). A key political aim of these campaigns was to challenge centralized bureaucratic control over decision making on issues of health and safety. This embodied a rejection of the limitations of existing labour laws which restricted union activity to economic issues only. Members of the CEHS asserted that labour participation in the development of workplace health and safety, as well as in the formation of public policy on workplace health and safety matters, was absolutely essential. As Aruni Srito stated, we can 'no longer allow the mechanisms for protecting and overseeing workers health and safety to be located within the bureaucratic system, both workers and employers have to have a role in overseeing safety issues' (cited in Cadet and Nakul 1997: 10).

In sum, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the TKTU played a significant role in maintaining a space for trade unionism, especially in the feminized textiles sector. It also became centrally involved in the emergence of new networks and alliances forged between international and a range of domestic organizations and labour-affiliated NGO groups such as the *Arom Phongphagnan* Foundation, Friends of Women, the first Thai women's organization to establish a project that targeted feminized labour in manufacturing and the Center for Labour Information and Training (CLIST). Each of these groups maintained close relationships with foreign support organizations such as the American Centre for International Labour Solidarity (ACILS), the Committee for Asian Women (CAW), the Clean Clothes Campaign, Women Working Worldwide, the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) and FES (Voravidh *et al.* 2003: 12). From the early 1990s onwards, a number of these international solidarity support organizations required that a certain proportion of women participate in the training and education programmes that they funded (Voravidh *et al.* 2003: 26). It was through these

alliances focusing on women and labour issues that a feminist critique of official unionism began to emerge. In turn, this led to the introduction of specific problems experienced by women workers into the labour movement's largely economistic and male-biased agenda. It also had the effect of expanding the arena for labour activism by taking labour organizing into a more socially and politically engaged direction that linked into the developing political space of civil society.

This trend away from 'bread-and-butter' unionism to a more directly, politically engaged labour activism accelerated after these new labour alliances came together with various NGOs and other groups to form the core of opposition to the military after the coup of February 1991 (Somsak 1993). After the ousting of the military government in May 1992, labour and NGO leaders became further involved in processes of political reform. They advocated constitutional requirements that promoted basic rights, social welfare and insurance, a reformed labour relations framework, expanded educational opportunities, a progressive tax system and changes to electoral laws that discriminated against male and female workers. They also made submissions that addressed issues reflecting the working class's continued links with rural areas. These included environmental protection, land distribution, rights for those using state lands, cooperatives, support for agricultural production and distribution and the promotion of organizations supporting the poor, disadvantaged, consumers and the public interest. Workers and their organizations also lobbied for further decentralization, including greater local democracy and more participation in the judicial system. Finally, labour groups supported other proposals by NGOs and democracy activists, including protection from arbitrary state action, access to information, and political and administrative reforms enhancing participation and transparency. In essence, these alliances of NGOs and organized labour groups through the 1990s proposed a shift of power away from the state.

These developing, more autonomous, spaces for organized labour activism within which female waged workers were occupying a key place at both rank-and-file and leadership levels became problematic as the 1997–8 Economic Crisis impacted on Thailand's society, economy and politics. In the economic sphere, the crisis generated significant industrial and workplace restructuring as firms ceased operations, entered into deals with local or overseas partners, relocated their operations to border areas or were absorbed into larger enterprises such as multinational corporations. For workers, this exacerbated existing problems and created further difficulties as they struggled to deal with widespread unemployment, declining real wages, widening inequality and workplace change, especially the use of flexible employment strategies, as well as employers' refusal to comply with labour laws, particularly those governing dismissal and the payment of wages owing and compensation. The crisis had a particularly dramatic impact on the feminized labour force in manufacturing, as between 60 and 75 per cent of those who lost their jobs were women (Dotson 2005: 6). Employment in textiles, leather and footwear industries were savagely cut with older women bearing the brunt of retrenchments.

In the political sphere, the crisis also produced a significant change as new

amalgams of interests coalesced to contest state power. Thaksin Shinawatra and his TRT party electoral victory in January 2001 signified the rise of a new complex of economic, political and ideological interests dominated by big domestic capital in the services, media, telecommunications and industrial sectors (Pasuk and Baker 2004). Over the next five years, the government attempted to rejuvenate a political economy devastated by the crisis. In the economic arena, the government expressed a desire to free Thailand from past growth strategies that emphasized the export of commodities with low-value added content produced by cheap unskilled wage-labour. Rather, the administration emphasized the need for new skills, increased productivity, value adding, industrial upgrading and the creation of a more sophisticated and globally engaged knowledge economy. Recognizing that the attainment of such goals required long-term political stability, the TRT government attempted to embed its control over the bureaucracy, circumscribe the operations of independent regulatory bodies, cement its domination over parliament, curb the demands of civil society and, through a range of campaigns, attempt to create a more ordered and disciplined society (see Pasuk and Baker 2004; McCargo and Ukrist 2005).

For workers, the 1997–8 crisis ignited a range of issues and disputes. In terms of industrial activism, labour became focused on the protection of jobs and the legal obligations of employers. As unemployment increased, many employers shirked their legal obligations to pay outstanding wages and redundancy remuneration. As Banthit (2001) has reported, in the wake of the crisis, private sector employers seized the opportunity to sack workers, especially older workers who received higher wages and were trade union members. Employers also strengthened their strategies, both legal and illegal, to combat union growth and collective bargaining during this period. The further weakening of trade unions and the undercutting of basic rights served the interests of capital in general, but especially those sections of industrial capital whose accumulation successes rely on the utilization of cheap, unskilled and disorganized feminized wage labour in labour-intensive manufacturing.

The problems encountered by the TKTU and its leadership during the post-crisis period illustrate some of the broader challenges that workers and their unions have faced in the context of economic restructuring, employer offensives and the slide towards authoritarian rule under Thaksin and TRT. Between 1994 and 2001, Thai Kriang was bought and sold twice, and each time the new management attempted to force through workplace restructuring, retrench staff and destroy the union.[2] On each occasion, the Thai Kriang workers remained defiant and engaged in industrial and legal action to protect their rights. Matters came to a head during 2000–1 as the workers sought small wage increases and responded to management's attempts to close unionized sections of the production process. Sit-ins at the factory were broken up by hired thugs, with a number of workers hospitalized after being sprayed with fire retardant. Although police were on hand, they did nothing to protect the workers. The TKTU then led a demonstration to government house, and in October 2000 the Labour Relations Committee was brought in to mediate and ordered the company to reinstate all workers.

Some were reinstated, but 390 unionized workers including Aruni Srito and other key union leaders were refused entry to the factory. In November 2000, a fire broke out in one of the company buildings and the company closed its operations. Although Thai Kriang resumed production in early 2001, it refused to reinstate over 500 union members. The dispute dragged on through the courts over the next few years as the company and union lodged claims and counter-claims for damages. Although the courts eventually ruled in favour of some of the workers' claims for compensation, the unionists did not win their jobs back and the TKTU was effectively destroyed.

The TLSC and the TLC

As indicated above, through the late 1980s and early 1990s, Thailand's labour movement began to move towards a more socially and politically engaged direction and operated through a more diverse range of organizational forms within which women occupied prominent roles. Through alliances between labour and non-labour actors, at times linking with foreign NGOs, labour organizations developed new strategies and tactics to campaign on, among other things, issues of health and safety, social security as well as basic labour rights. Although gains were uneven and organized labour remained industrially and politically marginalized, the post-crisis period has seen the outbreak of numerous industrial actions accompanied by sporadic episodes of violence. Women workers, in particular, became involved in a number of long-running disputes and protests at particular factories, some of which have attracted international attention, especially where employers sought to avoid legal obligations such as redundancy payments. Many of these disputes were accompanied by public actions including rallies and street marches (Brown and Hewison 2005). This grass-roots activism has spawned renewed efforts to further redefine and extend the limits of both formal and informal channels through which labour interests can be organized, mobilized and represented.

One important new group to emerge that has involved women is the TLSC (*khana kamakan samanchan raengngan thai*), established in March 2003. The TLSC represents an ambitious attempt to bring together a range of organizational vehicles under a single umbrella and develop a more coordinated and sustained attempt to campaign and press the government to institute labour reforms (Fa Diaw Kan Editorial 2003: 14–17). The TLSC has taken as one of its main aims to promote and foster unity and solidarity with labour ranks and to overcome the fragmented nature of labour organizations at the national level. Now led by Wilaiwan Saetia, a long-time female labour activist, the TLSC emerged out of cooperation between district labour groups, various labour federations, elements within the labour councils and NGOs. The TLSC has based its operations in and around the newly established Thai Labour Museum where it holds its meetings and also sponsors various public seminars and activities. The link with the Thai Labour Museum is significant as the TLSC aims to inject labour concerns into broader social and political arenas of debate by using

labour's historical involvement in struggles for democratic rights and guarantees as a means for justifying this strategy. Under Wilaiwan's direction, the TLSC played an important role in co-coordinating organized labour's response to the anti-Thaksin government demonstrations that eventually led up to the coup d' état of 19 September 2006.

Another new organizational vehicle that has emerged to represent the interests of workers has been the TLC. The TLC was established in February 2000 by Junya Lek Yimprasert, one of a new generation of female labour activists who has been working on labour, peoples' movement, NGO and international issues for over a decade (the following is based on an interview with Junya Lek Yimprasert June 2004). Not officially registered as an NGO, the TLC occupies a dubious political space within which it conducts a range of research, education and other organizing activities. The TLC now has eight full-time staff of former trade unionists and grass-roots activists. The TLC has attracted funding from a number of local and international organizations including ACILS, Clean Clothes Campaign, the War on Want and Oxfam. In terms of its organizational structures, the TLC stresses the need for financial transparency, internal democracy and gender equality as a direct counter to the hierarchical and patriarchal character of the official union movement, especially at peak labour council level.

A key feature of the TLC's activities has been a rejection of the restrictive national focus of officially sanctioned trade union movement in struggling for labour rights. Rather, TLC argues that labour needs to adopt new and innovative forms of organizing and representation. In particular, the TLC recognized that there was a need to link episodes of labour activism in Thailand with broader global labour campaigns. To this end, TLC now maintains a widening network of regional and global contacts which are used to disseminate knowledge and information about labour rights and labour disputes that are occurring in Thailand. The TLC also conducts research into local labour conditions, the findings of which are then incorporated into global labour campaigning. In particular, TLC has played an important role in defending worker's rights and supporting various struggles and campaigns in the heavily feminized textiles, garments, food, toy and jewellery sectors by advertising and seeking international support for local disputes. For example, when the owners of the Bed and Bath Company, which produced branded clothes and shoes for Nike, Adidas, Reebok and Levis, left Thailand without paying their largely feminized workforce compensation and outstanding wages, TLC managed to elicit international support from the Clean Clothes Campaign, the Campaign for Labour Rights, the *Maquila* Solidarity Network and Nike Watch. The TLC has employed a similar strategy to support women workers involved in disputes with the Light House Company, which subcontracted for Samsonite, and with Gina Form Bra which produced underwear for big brand names such as GAP and K-Mart. TLC's strategy of mobilizing regional and international support to build pressure on these local employers and government officials and agencies has, as in the Gina Form Bra case, met with considerable success (Robertson and Somsak 2004).

Apart from forging networks of international labour solidarity, TLC is also

playing an important role in providing grass-roots education to workers through its 'labour caravan activities'. The labour caravan approach explicitly rejects the approaches to training pursued by unions which are usually held in hotels hired for the day and only involve a minority of union leaders. The 'labour caravan', in contrast, targets workers in industrial districts and communities and seeks to educate and provide information to workers on issues such as social security, health, trade unionism and basic rights of freedom of association through the use of a range of activities and media such as music, pamphlets, photos, discussions and flyers.

In sum, the TLC's philosophy has been guided by the need for a focus on the links between global and regional and local conditions, and the TLC has developed a new range of strategies and tactics and rejection of the 'one size fits all' model of labour activism that has dominated state-sanctioned trade union organizing. To this end, the TLC has placed great emphasis on building networks of solidarity in Thailand with existing unions, labour federations, NGOs, women's groups, lawyers and human rights groups. TLC has contributed to building a heightened visibility for organized labour as part of broader peoples' movement while also seeking to foster and encourage the growth of a new generation of female labour leaders through more expansive networking and education.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the political legacies of authoritarianism in Thailand, Turton (1984: 21) emphasized how 'legitimate or claimable space for ... democratic, alternative or participatory, let alone fundamental oppositional ideas and forms of organization have been severely restricted'. However, the state's ability to limit political space for labour and labour organizing has been imperfect as workers have continually struggled to seek redress for a range of old and new grievances. In this chapter, we have tried to indicate the important role that Thailand's feminized workforce has played in this process over the recent past. Women's activism was central to the struggle for trade union rights through the early- to mid-1970s. Through their grass-roots activism at particular workplaces and in industrial districts, women's activism was important for sustaining labour organizing during the 1980s even as conventional state-sanctioned trade unionism was being undermined by rapid structural change and its subversion by hostile non-labour interests. Significantly, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was the emerging feminist critique of the hierarchical, bureaucratic and patriarchal nature of state-sanctioned unionism that substantially contributed to the search for new spaces for labour organizing. By campaigning on issues such as maternity leave, health and safety, subcontracting, women's activism was important for taking labour organizing into a more socially and politically engaged direction. This linking of labour issues with a wider social movement politics has continued during the more recent past, especially during the Thaksin period (2001–6).

Thailand's labour movement is now operating through a much more diverse range of organizational vehicles within which women are assuming important leadership roles. While older female leaders remain active, labour organizing now involves a newer generation of female activists who are bringing new perspectives to labour problems and are seeking to employ innovative strategies to support grass-roots activism through linkages at subnational, national and international scales. The TLC, in particular, is playing an important and innovative role in expanding these geographical spaces for labour activisms, a strategy that has developed as a direct response to the limited national and Bangkok-centric approaches of Thailand's male-dominated, state-sponsored and regulated trade unionism of the past.

Notes

1 The following discussion draws heavily upon Thai Labour (2005) and Withun (1992).
2 The following account draws on Naewruam phua khwam kawna khong phu ying (Front for the Advancement of Women) (2001).

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8 India

The Self Employed Women's Association and autonomous organizing

Elizabeth Hill

Indian women have a vibrant history of leadership and participation in the social, economic and political development of their country (Omvedt 1979; Gandhi and Shah 1992; Kumar 1993). But the same cannot be said of their trade union experience. Women have not been well served by India's trade unions and are largely absent from the movement's history (Menon 1992; RoyChowdhury 2005). Forged within the factories and smelters that drove the early days of India's industrial development, the Indian labour movement is premised upon a gendered construction of 'worker' defined as a male, factory-based employee. The wages and conditions of women working in the same factories or beyond the factory gate as daily labourers, vendors or home-based industrial outworkers have traditionally registered little interest with male trade union officials who fail to conceptualize women as workers.

While exclusion by male-dominated trade unions is not an experience unique to Indian women, the structure of women's labour market participation within the Indian economy has made organizing women workers for economic and social security a particularly difficult and urgent enterprise. Unlike labour markets in advanced economies, employment in the Indian economy is heavily concentrated in what economists call the 'informal economy'. In the Indian literature, this part of the economy is often referred to as the 'unorganized sector'.[1] Labour economists estimate that approximately 91 per cent of the Indian labour force is employed outside the formally 'organized' economy, beyond the purview of protective labour legislation, social security provisions and the relative employment security of a formal wage-labour relationship (Gayathri 2005: 36).[2] It is in this sphere of the economy that the majority of women find employment. Only 4 per cent of working women are employed in the organized industry and service sector. The remaining 96 per cent – approximately 100 million of India's working women (Mukhopadhyay 1997: 484) – are engaged in a variety of informal production and employment relationships with no access to fair wages, decent working conditions, protective labour laws and social security (Deshpande and Deshpande 1997: 546). Nevertheless, mainstream trade unions have historically failed to organize these women workers or campaign for improved wages and conditions (Menon 1992).

This chapter explores the dynamics of women's labour activism in the Indian

context through an analysis of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). SEWA is not the only formally registered women's union in India: the Working Women's Forum (WWF) in Chennai and the Annapurna Mahila Mandal (AMM) in Mumbai are two other well-known organizations that have also established women's unions. SEWA was, however, the first women's union to be established in India at a time when, as discussed in the introduction to this volume, women-only unions were also being launched in Canada and the USA. This investigation into SEWA's evolution, structure and character demonstrates how an all-women's union has successfully addressed the traditional constraints on women's involvement in the trade union movement and delivered improved economic and social security to its members. Contrary to mainstream belief, women workers can be highly motivated and find the time to engage in strategies for work-life reform through their union. SEWA's success at organizing large numbers of vulnerable and marginalized women workers suggests that women-only unions have a critical role to play in promoting the social and economic security of women workers.

Women and unions

Studies on women's trade union experience in India claim that low rates of union membership amongst working women are driven by both discriminatory union practices and individual constraints. Scholars mostly argue that union apathy and the dominant patriarchal culture of the labour movement are the primary reasons for the labour movement's failure to organize women (Menon 1992; RoyChowdhury 2005). With a focus on the factory gate, trade union officials have failed to recognize what women do as 'work' and instead interpret women's economic activity as some kind of short-term household strategy that does not compromise their primary status as wife and mother. Alternatively, unions have perceived the low wages most women receive when they do participate in the economy as a potential threat to the higher wages and job security enjoyed by male union members and so refused to represent them. Union leaders also refer to practical problems such as resource constraints as a reason why they have not traditionally organized women workers. The organization of women who work in the fields, in forests, inside their homes and on the streets requires strategies that often take more time and resources than traditional factory-based organizing methods. To date, mainstream trade unions have resisted the ideological, cultural and practical changes that organizing women workers requires, leaving women workers effectively 'locked out' of unions.[3]

In addition to union apathy, the literature suggests that women themselves are typically reluctant or unable to engage in union activities. The practical issue of time is often presented as the primary factor that influences women's participation. Busy combining paid and domestic work, women are said to claim they have little time available in their daily schedules to attend union meetings and join in union campaigns and activities (Menon 1992; Christopher 1996). Cultural constraints around women's independence and social mobility are also

reported to limit women's participation in the union movement. Prevailing beliefs about appropriate female behaviour often mean women do not have the personal freedom to move beyond the private sphere of the household and away from domestic duties to attend meetings and participate in leadership functions (Gandhi and Shah 1992: 200–2).[4] For these reasons, unions claim it has been difficult to organize women, leaving them poorly represented amongst the rank and file or in positions of union leadership.

Data from the fifty-fifth round of the National Sample Survey, 2001, list the total unionization rate of Indian workers at 8.83 per cent and the female unionization rate at 4.06 per cent (Dasgupta 2002). As a proportion of total union membership, women's participation is also low. Figures from a study published in the mid-1980s estimate that for the period 1960–80, women constituted 6–9 per cent of total union membership (Gandhi and Shah 1992: 199). A decade later, an international labour organization (ILO) survey of unions affiliated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) estimated that 15 per cent of rank-and-file union members were women (ILO 2000: 76). Assessing women's participation in leadership positions, the same study showed that in 1996 a total of only four women served as executive board members on ICFTU-affiliated unions, up from only two in 1992.

However, low rates of official representation in mainstream unions do not mean women have been silent or indifferent about their work-life experience. Indian feminists have a long history as labour activists. In 1917, Anasuya Sarabai provided leadership for what one Indian labour historian regards as the first 'real trade union organized in the country' – the Textile Labour Association (TLA) (Ramanujam 1986: 13). In the late 1920s, Maniben Kare was leading the Bombay railway workers (Kumar 1993: 69) and Ushabai Dange and Parvati Bhore were dynamic leaders of textile workers in Bombay (Kumar 1994). While these women were leaders in the formal union movement, women have more typically agitated for higher wages, improved work conditions and economic security on the fringes of, or outside, the mainstream labour movement rather than from within it. Sometimes, this has been in the 'women's wings' of regular trade unions (Gandhi and Shah 1992: 200–2; Kamath and Kher 1993). Increasingly, women's labour activism is located within non-government organizations (NGOs) and other member-based organizations (Kalpagam 1994; Ramaswamy 1997; Antony 2002; Sinha 2004).

The genesis of SEWA

SEWA's institutional and philosophical roots lie in the women's wing of the TLA. Established in 1917 by the cotton mill workers in Ahmedabad under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Anasuya Sarabai, the TLA was India's first and eventually largest union of textile workers (Kamath and Kher 1993).[5] Anasuya, the sister of one of the mill owners, was the first president of the TLA. It was under her leadership that the union appointed a women's wing with a mandate to undertake programmes specifically aimed at assisting women

workers (Rose 1992: 40). It was to this overtly feminist, albeit welfare-orientated, organization that Ela Bhatt was appointed director in 1968.

The members of the women's wing quickly became dissatisfied with the welfare orientation of the organization and began to advocate for their own union. The women saw the benefits the TLA was able to deliver to factory-based textile workers and wanted to organize themselves to get the same benefits and conditions (Rose 1992: 44). On 3 December 1971, a group of used-garment traders, head-loaders, cart pullers, vegetable vendors and carpenters achieved their dream and established SEWA as a separate association within the TLA. The women appointed Ela Bhatt as their general secretary, and Arvind Buch, the TLA's president, became SEWA's inaugural president.

Soon after this victory, the women who founded SEWA sought to register it as a trade union in its own right. Officials at the Gujarat Labour Department charged with implementation of the Trade Union Act found the SEWA women's demand to be registered as a union perplexing. The 1929 Trade Union Act of India did not deem those who were 'self-employed' or dependent wage-labourers to be 'workers'. In the absence of an identifiable employer against whom workers could agitate, the SEWA women were ineligible to register themselves as a trade union. But the women argued that a trade union was not solely for the purpose of struggling against an employer, but also for representing and defending the interests of workers. The demand that self-employed women be recognized as 'workers' with an equal need for industrial representation as that enjoyed by their male factory-based counterparts challenged socially constructed notions of 'woman' and the dominant legal and cultural understanding of what it meant to be a 'trade union' and a 'worker'. After much conflict over the definition and goals of a trade union, Labour Department officials finally accepted SEWA's application, and in April 1972 SEWA was registered as a trade union of women workers able to agitate and advocate for their own well-being and development.

Initially, SEWA enjoyed the support of the TLA executive. The TLA provided SEWA with institutional assistance, including office space, finances and the service of its members on the SEWA executive committee. But relations soon soured. As SEWA began to expand, they enjoyed some success and pursued what the TLA increasingly felt was a non-union agenda, the women's union met with growing resistance. SEWA was thought to be too independent for the TLA leadership. While the TLA was used to women's concerns being raised through the long-standing women's wing, the union had always taken a classic welfare-type approach to women workers and female relatives of male mill workers. As a factory-based union, the TLA had not treated the concerns of women mill workers seriously and had disregarded their plight when retrenched. The TLA had never considered the women working in the textile industry outside the factory gate in the unorganized sector as 'workers' with an equal need for social security and protective labour laws as that enjoyed by male factory workers (Kabeer 1994: 232). SEWA, however, disputed this masculinist view of work and entitlements and continued to develop an organizing

programme that reflected the specific interests, needs and problems of women workers.

As a result, the TLA found it increasingly difficult to maintain good relationships with their female comrades. SEWA activities were developing beyond traditional forms of trade union activity and expanding into the development of trade cooperatives, legal aid, childcare, credit and banking services and social insurance. The breadth of SEWA's emerging work was beyond the experience and expectations of the TLA who argued they were not paying adequate attention to traditional trade union functions. In 1981, the growing rift between the TLA and SEWA came to a head. The context of the final dispute was the riots communal tension over the reservation of medical college seats for students from the *dalit* caste across India.[6] Many of SEWA's members were *dalits*, and Ela Bhatt publicly declared her support. The TLA had, however, decided to be silent on the issue and charged SEWA with indiscipline for their support of the reservation. The failure of SEWA leadership to maintain union discipline over the reservation issue meant the rift between the two organizations deepened. SEWA was beginning to act on its own and the TLA leadership felt it could not tolerate further insurrection. The result was that SEWA was expelled as an affiliate of the TLA.[7] Three days after their formal expulsion from the TLA, SEWA held a meeting of members. This was the first SEWA meeting at which there was not a single man present. A resolution was passed that men would not be allowed to be members or office bearers of SEWA again. Ela Bhatt recalls the liberation of the moment: 'Although insulted at the way we had been thrown out, really, we felt most powerfully, an incredible sense of freedom. It felt like a daughter's righteous struggle. We had left the nest' (cited in Rose 1992: 80).

SEWA's struggle to be registered as a union of working women reflects the entrenched gender bias of mainstream institutions. The Trade Union Act of India was designed to serve formal (male) workers and ignored the women who worked beyond the factory gate in a range of informal employment arrangements in which there is no clearly identifiable employer or work-colleagues. Likewise, the TLA was established upon the work-life experience of formally employed factory workers. With its mandate to promote the social and economic security of women workers, SEWA pushed the TLA beyond the boundary of traditional union concerns about wages and conditions. Ultimately, the TLA found it impossible to tolerate the unconventional organizing strategies developed by their SEWA comrades and they parted company. In SEWA's experience, the needs of women workers directly challenge the patriarchal status quo. This was true at SEWA's inception and remains true today as the mainstream labour movement continues to resist SEWA's inclusion at some union forums. The masculine culture of the TLA in the 1970s and in the contemporary union movement makes organizing women workers within mainstream unions difficult. In SEWA's experience, maintaining a formal connection to the TLA became untenable. Without a union of their own, it was unlikely that informal women workers would have the opportunity to discover their own voice, define their own needs and establish their own strategies for work-life reform. The

divergence in the work-life experience of men and women workers is just too significant for most unions to straddle, and SEWA continues to find the mainstream union movement resistant to their methodology and difficult to cooperate with.

SEWA today

As an all-women's union, SEWA now has more than 30 years of experience organizing marginalized women workers for social and economic security. The unions' goals are to organize women working in the informal economy for full employment and self-reliance. Full employment at SEWA means employment, whereby workers obtain work security, income security, food security and social security – health care, childcare, insurance and shelter at a minimum. Self-reliance refers to the process by which women become autonomous and self-reliant, both economically and in decision-making, and is practised at both the individual and the collective level. SEWA is based in the state of Gujarat where, with almost half-a-million members, it is the largest union. SEWA also has affiliates in other states, including Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar and Delhi, bringing the all-India membership to 688,743. This makes SEWA the largest union in India (Bhatt 2006: 16).

Membership has grown rapidly since 2000 with numbers more than doubling (see Table 8.1).[8] In Gujarat, almost one-third of the membership are urban-based workers, while more than two-thirds of members live and work in rural areas.

SEWA members are recruited from a wide variety of trades and services reflecting the heterogeneity of employment and production relations that shape the informal economy (see Table 8.2). These can be divided into four main categories: home-based workers, including weavers, potters, bidi rollers, agarbatti rollers, dry food makers, tailors, handicraft artisans and embroiderers; hawkers and vendors, including those who purchase goods such as vegetables, fruit, fish, other food items, household items and clothes from wholesalers and sell them in different parts of the city; manual labourers and service providers, including agricultural labourers, construction site workers, handcart pullers, head-loaders, dhobi wallahs and cooks; and rural producers or women who invest their own labour and capital to do business, including gum collectors, salt workers and cattle/dairy farmers.

The union is governed by three tiers of elected representatives who contribute to the trade committees, the trade councils and the executive committee. Elections to positions on these three forums are held every three years. The

Table 8.1 Growth in SEWA's membership 2000–2004

	2000	*2004*
Gujarat membership	205,985	468,445
All India membership	318,527	688,743

Sources: SEWA Annual Report (2002; 2004).

Table 8.2 SEWA's membership in Gujarat by occupation, 2004

Occupation	*No. of members*	*Proportion of membership (%)*
Hawkers and vendors	28,575	6
Rural producers	40,080	9
Home-based workers	85,976	18
Labour and service providers	313,814	67

Source: Adapted from SEWA Annual Report (2004).

various trade committees (*Dhandh Samiti*) meet monthly and have between 15 and 50 members. They are trade specific and are organized on a geographical basis. The purpose of the trade committees is to recruit and provide workers with a forum at which they can discuss problems and plan grass-roots campaigns for change. From the trade committees, representatives are elected to a central trade council (*Pratinidhi Mandal*) at a ratio of one delegate per 200 members from each trade. The trade council members are responsible for providing supervision, support and motivation to local trade leaders as well as advocating on behalf of their own trade within the broader union structure. They are also responsible for negotiating union business with government officials. Ultimate responsibility for the mission and vision of the union is held by the executive committee, whose 25 members are elected by the trade council. Trade representation on the executive committee reflects the ratio of members from the different trades. Union office bearers are elected from the executive committee, and the president is traditionally elected from the trade with the largest membership. To manage and implement the decisions of the executive committee, a general secretary and two secretaries are elected from among the paid union staff.

As a union of women employed in the informal economy, SEWA has developed in ways that make it 'look' quite different to a mainstream union. Apart from its all-women membership and leadership, SEWA has evolved into a union that provides a broad range of alternative member-based and member-run institutions designed to promote the economic and social security of women workers. Trade cooperatives provide many women with the opportunity to work collectively and run their own organization beyond the reach of exploitative middlemen. The Gujarat State Mahila SEWA Co-operative Federation Ltd is the umbrella organization under which more than 90 SEWA-organized trade, service, producer and financial cooperatives operate. These include craft-based artisan cooperatives, dairy and forestry cooperatives, vendor cooperatives and cleaning cooperatives, as well as childcare and health care cooperatives. The largest cooperative in the SEWA Federation is the Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank. The Bank provides savings, loan and insurance products to members (Vyas 2001). The union also promotes women's economic security and workplace reform through the leadership and vocational training activities offered at the SEWA Academy. In addition, the Academy

provides research, documentation, communication and publication services to the union. Business and marketing support for members is provided by the Trade Facilitation Centre. Here, artisans and other producers receive design, marketing and trade advice on producing goods for the domestic and global market. The social and economic stability of union members is also facilitated through the services of the Mahila Housing Trust and the union's legal service provides casework support to members. Funding for these, and other, services comes from a variety of sources. In 2004, membership fees and other internally generated revenue delivered only 8 per cent of the total budget. State and federal government funding provided 28 per cent of the budget with institutional donors supplying a further 57 per cent of total funding. The remaining 7 per cent of the budget was funded from an endowment fund and individual donations. Funding for 2004 totalled Rs.262,993,714 – approximately US$5,844,304 (SEWA 2004).[9]

The breadth of the advocacy, training, financial and social services available to SEWA members is a defining feature of SEWA's organizational strategy. They also play an important role as a recruitment strategy for informal workers looking to improve their work-life. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore five other features of SEWA's organizational practice that set it apart from the mainstream union movement:

1 common work-life experience;
2 development of the whole person;
3 organizing, not servicing;
4 resocializing work;
5 organizational values and ethos.

In discussing each of these strategic features, I demonstrate the strengths of SEWA's unconventional approach to labour activism and the positive impact union membership has on the development of women worker's economic and social security.

1 Organizing around common work-life experience

SEWA organizes members on the basis of their common work-life experience. With more than 100 trades and occupations represented amongst the membership, common work-life experience rather than trade is the foundation upon which the union establishes its collective voice. Dispersed across different trades and regions, women share a common work-life experience in which the social and institutional relations of production, exchange and reproduction produce deeply entrenched forms of social, economic and political insecurity and exclusion. Whether they are employed as vendors, home-based workers or daily labourers, a woman's work-life is typically shaped by very low and irregular wages, insecure and exploitative 'terms' of employment, dependence on middlemen and contractors, inadequate social security, violence, isolation and voice-

lessness. It is around these shared experiences of exploitation, harassment and non-recognition that SEWA members unite, develop a collective voice, campaign for recognition and better working conditions and establish a shared identity as 'work-sisters' (Bhatt 2006: 3). This differentiates SEWA from traditional unions that organize workers according to a common trade or enterprise.

An advantage of SEWA's alternative organizing logic is that the number of workers the union has been able to attract is very large. With a current membership of almost half a million, the union carries considerable bargaining power in its negotiations with the state Labour Department, police and other official authorities. Size and a track record of some success also produces the kind of industrial muscle and political clout effective in securing improvements in women's working conditions. Moreover, collective strength has allowed the union to pursue innovative strategies such as the SEWA Bank that might not have been possible with a smaller trade-specific membership. Established in 1974 at the initiative of 4,000 union members, the SEWA Bank was the very first bank established in India for poor and illiterate women. In developing alterative institutions to meet the needs of poor working women, numbers matter. The popularity of the Bank amongst union members has provided the capital and client base upon which the Bank has been able to develop a full range of banking and insurance services specifically designed to support the union's goals of full employment and self-reliance for workers (Chatterjee and Vyas 2000; Vyas 2001).

SEWA's focus on common work-life experience does not, however, mean trade affiliation is unimportant. Many of the workplace strategies SEWA members have developed to combat exploitation and redefine working life are industry specific. The SEWA trade and service cooperatives, for example, are designed to address the particular forms of exploitation women face in their specific industries. Union campaigns for higher wages focus on specific trades, although SEWA has been active in state-based and national campaigns for a universal minimum wage through the National Centre for Labour (NCL).[10] Trade affiliation is also an important recruitment and organizing strategy. With all self-employed women eligible for membership, SEWA manages the practical constraints associated with a diverse and spatially fragmented membership by organizing workers according to their trade and the area in which they live and work. Trade committees provide members with grass-roots access to union activities and decision-making. It is at the level of the trade committees that local campaigns are developed and new recruits engaged.

SEWA also uses geographical strategies to maximize member's participation in the union. Each district in Ahmedabad city and the rural areas is allocated a union organizer who is responsible for recruitment, coordinating union activities and implementing policy. This layer of 'geographical unionism' at SEWA serves both a practical and a strategic purpose. At a practical level, locality-based organizing networks reduce the cost and time taken to organize workers spread over large distances.[11] Close interaction between union organizers and regular members facilitates efficient communication and coherent action

between large groups of workers. It also enhances members' sense of ownership of the union since they know and trust the local women who are union organizers. This has a strategic impact. The high rate of member interaction establishes the worker solidarity and public recognition upon which the bargaining power of members depends. The visibility of union members and activities in turn supports the recruitment of new members.

While trade and geographically based strategies are important aspects of SEWA's organizing model, much of SEWA's success has come from the union's capacity to organize across trade and regional barriers. This demonstrates that unions do not have to be specifically trade-based to be successful. To organize women who work beyond the formal structure of the factory and official employment contracts, SEWA has found that interventions for women's socio-economic security require a large, united and collective voice. The source of this solidarity and power is women's shared work-life experience established upon structures of economic exploitation and insecurity that transcend simple trade affiliation. The collective voice of women from various trades, regions, religious and ethnic backgrounds has established SEWA as a union with significant bargaining power and resources upon which members can access better work conditions and social security. Trade-based organizing alone would not have produced the same result.

2 Development of the whole person

SEWA affirms members' identity as 'workers'. This is a radical claim given the failure of the prevailing economic and cultural context to recognize women's productive work. In asserting their status as workers, the union demands employers, contractors and government officials recognize women as workers with a legitimate right to decent wages and conditions. More radical, however, is SEWA's holistic conception of the worker and the development of union strategies that address the needs of the whole person. The daily reality for working women demonstrates that women's work-lives are not neatly separated from their domestic lives. For many women, the home is also the workplace. Women who do not have access to childcare are forced to take their children with them to the worksite. Poor sanitation in the squatter settlements where many workers live leads to frequent ill health, reducing the days women are able to work and collect wages. Family rituals such as marriage and funerals deliver long-term debt and sometimes destitution. These realities have forced SEWA to reconceptualize the relationship between work and economic security within the broad spectrum of members' total work-life experience and in doing so extend the locus of union organizing beyond the labour/capital conflict and traditional issues of wages and conditions.

Such a holistic understanding of worker identity blurs the analytical divisions often made between the public and private sphere, between production and reproduction and between economic and social security. Union women understand that what happens in the private sphere of the home affects their capacity

to engage in the public sphere, that the prevailing conditions of reproduction shape productive capacity and that access to social security supports women's economic security. In addressing this reality, SEWA has developed a union strategy very different in practice and appearance to that of mainstream male unions. This is not to say the goals are different: improved wages and conditions for women workers are the primary objective. What is different, however, is SEWA's understanding about how better wages and conditions, and the economic and social security they guarantee, can be delivered to women workers.

The private sphere and productivity

In the effort to promote full employment and self-reliance for members, SEWA soon found itself involved in issues such as housing, health care, childcare and nutrition. Union organizers found that workers who experienced deprivation in the private sphere were not able to be productive workers. Piece-rate workers who were undernourished and often unwell had very low productivity. Home-based workers with small and insecure dwellings were unable to improve the quality and expand the quantity of their production. Illiterate vendors were easily exploited by wholesalers and police. These experiences taught the union that there is a close relationship between a woman's reproductive needs and her productive capacity. By reconceptualizing the relationship between the private sphere of reproduction and the public sphere of productive paid work, the union was compelled to broaden their understanding of 'worker' to take account of the whole person, defined by their social, political and cultural context. In doing so, traditional union concerns about low wages and poor work conditions became understood to be perpetuated by exploitative production relations and inadequate conditions of reproduction. Childcare and health care, in particular, are reconceptualized as productive resources with the potential to generate higher wages and economic security for members (Chatterjee and Macwan 1992; Bhatt 2006).

The Sangini Child Care Co-operative, for example, was developed as a union priority and now provides 128 regular childcare facilities as well as mobile crèches for construction workers and other daily labourers whose place of work changes regularly. The childcare centres are designed to provide a quality service that meets the needs of workers and their children at an affordable price. The centres also provide training and educational classes for women on child health, nutrition and other work-related issues. With children cared for away from the work site, women's productivity is reported to improve as much as 50 per cent (Chatterjee and Macwan 1992). Childcare also has a positive impact on the quality and quantity of care children are able to receive during the workday and on longer term educational outcomes. SEWA has found that a child that goes to one of the Sangini centres is more likely than other children to continue on to school.[12]

In SEWA's organizational framework, health care is also reconceptualized as a resource that supports women's capacity to engage in the kinds of productive work that can deliver a decent and secure wage. The People's Health Cooperative – the Lokswasthya Cooperative – was registered in 1990 to provide direct

primary health care services for union members and their families. In particular, the cooperative played a strategic role in repositioning traditional *dais* (midwives) at the centre of state provided community health activities. By training the *dais* in modern and safe delivery procedures, the union has facilitated improved maternal and child heath care amongst members and 'professionalized' the status, skills and wages of a traditionally female occupation (Bhatt 2006: 127). The cooperative also runs health centres for rural and urban members and in Ahmedabad city provides low-cost drug counters in government and private hospitals. These health services support women's well-being and long-term productive capacity.

Organizing informal women workers has shown SEWA that a woman's capacity to generate long-term economic security through paid employment can be compromised by a lack of access to basic forms of social security. For women working in the informal economy, the absence of a formal labour contract means there are often no social security provisions: no maternity leave, no sick leave, no disability protection or life insurance. This leaves workers particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, civil unrest, illness and misadventure. Small gains made over time through the appropriation of small loans or vocational training are quickly lost though disaster or misadventure to which poor workers are highly exposed. Identification of the strategic link between social and economic security led SEWA to develop a suite of insurance products that deliver social protection to workers during extraordinary times of civic unrest and natural disaster, as well as through the regular life course. Maternity leave, sick leave, life insurance and disability insurance provide workers with a safety net that helps sustain them and their families during times of crisis and prevent them falling into indebtedness or other economic trouble that might undermine long-term economic security.

The holistic approach SEWA has developed in the way they conceptualize workers has led to the development of a particularly broad range of strategic responses that challenge traditional notions of union activity. So profound is the difference between SEWA's methods and those of mainstream trade unions that some observers consider SEWA a non-government development agency (NGO) or women's organization and not a union (Spooner 2004: 31).[13] But SEWA is a formally registered union. The difference is that as a union of working women, SEWA has discovered that members' work-lives and economic security are not only affected by wages and conditions in the workplace, but by the interplay between women's multiple roles, responsibilities and needs. The lived experience of union members demonstrates that the public and private spheres of working women's lives are not as separate as they are typically treated by unions and that there is a complex interface between the conditions of reproduction and a women's productive capacity, as well as between the conditions of social and economic security. The practical outcome of the blurring of these analytical boundaries is a comprehensive set of integrated union strategies that focus on the struggle over wages and conditions and the support and development of member's capabilities and productive potential.

3 Organizing, not servicing

A third feature of SEWA that sets it apart from mainstream trade union practice and contributes to its success is the focus on organizing and not merely servicing members. The language of organizing is not unique to SEWA – most trade unions talk about organizing, but at SEWA organizing translates into a high level of participation by union members in every aspect of the union's work and activities. Based on a belief in the inherent leadership and strength of women, SEWA members are conceptualized as active participants in their own development, not passive receivers of union services. Rank-and-file members are responsible for organizing new workers, running meetings, developing agendas and formulating union policy. They also draft union demands, prepare and undertake meetings with government officials, judges, police and employers as well as manage the worker-owned trade and service cooperatives. The union supports members through the provision of specialist skills and inputs such as legal advocacy, management, financial and vocational training, but workers advocate on their own behalf for their own development and the well-being of their work-sisters. This is reflected in the membership-based structure of SEWA's alternative economic and social institutions that are not only run *for*, but *by* union members. This type of member-based, member-centred form of organizing produces several strategic outcomes for the union.

First, positioning working women as agents in their own struggle establishes the integrity and authenticity of the struggle. Government officials, judges and sometimes even employers and contractors are reported to be genuinely confronted by the personal presentation of workers' difficulties rather than meeting with an official union advocate.[14] Second, SEWA's participatory approach to organizing provides members with regular opportunities to develop the skills and capabilities they require to build the collective strength and bargaining power of their union. These opportunities are supported by the leadership and vocational training programmes run by the SEWA Academy. Third, SEWA's grass-roots organizing model raises worker consciousness and empowers women to organize themselves to pursue recognition and well-being in the public sphere (Bhowmik and Jhabvala 1996; Bhowmik and Patel 1996; Hill 2001; Bhatt 2006).

4 Resocializing work

Much of SEWA's success derives directly from its strategy of resocializing the work-life of women who are typically sidelined from both the mainstream economy and mainstream social and political life. Denied social recognition and public support, these workers typically suffer low levels of self-esteem, self-respect and self-confidence. They also tend to lack important information about their trade and employment context. This leaves them voiceless, vulnerable to exploitative contractors and employers and excluded from public policy deliberations. In this context, the establishment of a dedicated union for working

women is a powerful symbolic and practical reality. The union's very existence promotes worker visibility and provides a platform from which workers can speak out and demand recognition and economic justice in the public sphere. But the union provides workers with much more than just a public platform. At a practical level, the union resocializes the work-life experience of women as they come together with other workers. The union provides working women with a physical and social place where they and their concerns are acknowledged, appreciated, strategized around and acted upon. By resocializing work, alternative non-exploitative workplaces are established where women can earn decent wages and improve their social security. In addition, the resocialization of women's work-life is found to have a positive impact on women's well-being.

SEWA members report that union membership has delivered a positive change in their psychological well-being – particularly their self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Hill 2001, 2005). This positive relationship to the self is derived from the recognition and respect women experience on coming together with other working women in their own institution. The social inclusion that union membership delivers women in turn builds strong worker identity. This newfound identity provides workers with the psychological integrity they claim is critical to their capacity to engage in public strategies for work-life reform. SEWA has found that until workers are able to identify themselves as workers and understand their role and contribution to the economy, they tend to lack the personal self-definition and solidarity required in the struggle to achieve that reform. Worker agency therefore has social foundations. At SEWA, women workers experience the interpersonal recognition and respect upon which they are able to establish the worker identity and solidarity required to pursue collective strategies for well-being.

The union provides practical opportunities for women to resocialize their daily work-life. Through the development of worker-owned and worker-run institutions, women are able to establish collective and collegial non-exploitative working arrangements. At the trade and service cooperatives, women come together to work alongside one another and manage their own production. At the trade committees, women who work in their homes or trade on the streets of Ahmedabad city meet together to exchange industry information and strategize towards collective work-life reform. Union-wide meetings and training programmes provide opportunities for workers from across the state of Gujarat to meet one another and collaborate for their collective well-being.

Strategies that resocialize women's work-life experience have two important outcomes. First, they can provide workers with non-exploitative workplaces. Second, they can create the social conditions in which workers can develop personal, collective and public recognition. With an established collective voice, workers are able to participate and speak out publicly on social and political issues that affect their lives. This is a particularly critical aspect of worker well-being, for without visibility and voice workers risk entrenched economic insecurity and poverty (Standing 1999).

5 Organizational values and ethos

SEWA's organizing methodology is based upon Gandhian philosophy and values. While not the only trade union to apply Gandhian principles, SEWA draws deeply on its historical connection to Mahatma Gandhi and the strategies of negotiation, moral persuasion and social struggle he and Anasuyaben Sarabai developed during the Ahmedabad mill strike of 1917. The Gandhian principles of *satya*, *ahimsa*, *sarvadharma* and *swadeshi* in particular provide the key coordinates of SEWA's organizing framework and practice of militant but non-violent trade unionism. *Satya*, the practice of being truthful and honest, shapes the union's research, advocacy and leadership programmes. *Ahimsa*, the practice of non-violence expressed in the concept of *satyagraha*, informs union campaigns to resist injustice through moral fortitude.[15] Rather than using brute force, union strategies aim to publicly confront and shame those who oppress and exploit women workers. In this way, SEWA members assert their own humanity while advocating peaceful and constructive means of addressing low wages and other forms of injustice. *Sarvadharma*, the practice of religious integration, is based on a belief in the equality of all faiths and all people. This is a critical feature of SEWA's organizational practice and is integrated into the daily union routine through the saying of prayers and singing of pledges derived from all faiths – Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi and Jain – at all union meetings. In a context defined by diversity in religion, geography and language, the principle of *sarvadharma* promotes the kind of trust and respect upon which union effectiveness depends. The principle of *swadeshi* revolves around a commitment to the propagation of local livelihoods, local economic development and the promotion of self-reliance. This principle defines the SEWA strategy and institutional culture – even the union dress code. Wearing *khadi*, a locally produced traditional Indian cotton fabric, is *de rigeur* at SEWA. Boycotting the consumption of industrially processed fabrics such as nylon and rayon, the union supports local industry, culture and jobs. This symbolic act is also reflected in the union's practical action to promote and protect local production techniques and the women who work in those industries. Through the trade cooperatives, traditional techniques and designs are improved, passed on to a new generation of artisans and distributed in emerging domestic and international markets. With the professional support of the SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre, the SEWA Gram Mahila Haat (The SEWA Rural Women's Marketing Unit) and Kutchkraft (a retail and online outlet in Ahmedabad city), the traditional crafts and produce of Gujarati women workers have become the source of women's economic independence and self-reliance.

Beyond the application of these principles to the union's strategies for work-life reform, Gandhi's broader message of liberation through economic independence has found particular resonance with SEWA's poor, self-employed members. Gandhi emphasized the role of the working classes, rural labour, women, traditional forms of work and trade unions in the life of the nation. As a Gandhian trade union, SEWA advocates this vision of an alternative

work-culture and economy to the individualistic, metropolitan and industrial future that lies at the centre of the neo-liberal capitalist development project. Gandhi's views on women's role in public and social affairs have also deeply influenced SEWA as a women-only union. Gandhi was forthright and radical in his views on women and their role in politics and the economy (Kishwar 1986; Gidwani 1989; Chanana 2001). He advocated women's independence and their right to resist oppression. Gandhi also expressed great faith in the inherent leadership and strength of women, arguing that women are natural leaders in the fight for social justice in which love, peace and non-violence are the chief weapons of the struggle.[16] He expected women to play an important role in the world of work and social change and argued that workers should awaken their consciousness and organize for unity as a matter of personal and corporate dignity. A union of poor working-class women is therefore a 'natural fit' with the Gandhian belief in the leadership capacities and responsibilities of women.

Finally, the indigenous character of Gandhian values and practices is a powerful recruitment and organizing tool in the campaign for women's economic justice. Union strategies 'speak into' an existing history and culture of social and political struggle. Workers respond positively to Gandhi's valuation of the individual, the political participation of women, the worker, the traditional, the rural and the poor. And while government officials and employers might resist SEWA's claims for work-life reform, their knowledge of Gandhian philosophy and values provides a context within which they can interpret SEWA's method and demands. The clear articulation of Gandhian values and ethos also builds internal cohesion within the union and empowers workers to organize and strategize independent of paid union leaders.

Conclusion

The size and success of SEWA shows that the mainstream union movement has been, and continues to be, misguided in its belief that women have neither the time nor the interest to participate in union organization. SEWA members *are* interested in work-life reform. They are actively engaged in union activities and reflect positively on the personal experience of union membership (Hill 2001, 2005). It would appear then that SEWA's organizing methodology resonates with the needs of working women in ways that mainstream trade unions do not. This raises the question: do women respond to different organizing tactics and strategies than men? Several studies of successful organizing amongst women workers conclude that gender can be a positive force in organizing (see for example Milkman 1985; Crain 1994; Kalpagam 1994; Martens and Mitter 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Riegos 1997; Rock 2001). In a study on the Domestic Workers Association (DWA) in Los Angeles, women were found to be more relational, willing to work together cooperatively and group-orientated than men (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Riegos 1997: 71). These are all attributes that suit collective organizing strategies. However, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Riegos do not suggest that women's personally connected political style and strong sense of

community and cooperation is due to some innate or essentially feminine characteristic. Instead, they argue that women's responsiveness to collective strategies is due to the structure of their work compared to men's and 'encouraged by the extreme isolation in which paid domestic work is performed' (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Riegos 1997: 73).

In an evaluation of organizing strategies amongst female garment workers in Bangalore, India, Supriya RoyChowdhury also points to the structure of work and the informality of production relations as the reasons why women's unions tend to take a more comprehensive approach to union organizing (2005: 2254). RoyChowdhury argues that strategies that focus on identity, health, education, housing and credit have developed largely because of the opaque nature of the employer–employee (capital–labour) relationship experienced by women workers. With an employer difficult to identify and therefore struggle against, the strategic emphasis of women's labour activism has had to broaden to include collective, campaign-based strategies that focus on the state rather than capital. And with women excluded from many of the privileges of citizenship, women workers in India have found they have to argue for social inclusion as well as formal employment rights. This takes Indian women's labour activism beyond the traditional union locus of wages and conditions.

SEWA's non-traditional organizing approach to women's labour activism has unsettled the male union establishment. It has also exposed deeply entrenched resistance by mainstream unions to address the unique needs of women workers, especially women employed in the informal economy. SEWA's emphasis on the common work-life experience, on addressing the whole person, on organizing and resocializing women's work-life around a common set of values is foreign to most masculine, industrial style unions. The childcare, health care, education, housing and credit services that have developed as meaningful responses to women's work-life experiences are not mainstream union activities. But these are the strategies that women have developed for themselves and through which they improve their economic and social security. These are the strategies that engage working women and have established SEWA as the largest primary union in India.

There are many examples of working women across India finding new and creative ways of organizing themselves for work-life reform. Some of these efforts are within mainstream unions, but most have developed beyond the traditional frameworks of labour activism. The failure of mainstream unions in India to understand women's work-lives and their reluctance to organize women suggests that all-women unions have a vital role to play in promoting the socio-economic security and well-being of working women. Indian women have much to gain from a union of their own.

Notes

1 While the two terms are not completely interchangeable, they are often used to talk about similar economic patterns and employment experiences. The 'un/organized

sector' has a specific statistical definition, whereas the 'informal economy' is a broader term used to refer to a wide variety of informal production and employment relations which expose workers to forms of risk not typically faced by workers covered by formal employment contracts. The 'unorganized sector' comprises establishments in the non-agricultural sector employing less than ten persons. The 'organized sector' comprises public sector establishments and non-agricultural establishments employing ten or more people in the private sector. The organized sector is regulated by a variety of labour and tax regulations from which the unorganized sector is exempt. Lack of regulation in the unorganized sector is associated with insecure and precarious work conditions for employees, low wages and poor work conditions.

2 Measurement of the labour force employed in the Indian informal sector varies between 90 and 93 per cent due to differing definitions and methods of data collection. There is, however, widespread agreement amongst academics and labour activists about the dominance of the sector. Improved survey methodologies are being developed by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in New Delhi.

3 Interview with Meena Patel, International Union Federation Regional office, February 1998.

4 This is not specific to the Indian context. Time available for union activities is also a function of the prevailing sexual division of labour in Australia (see Franzway 2001).

5 For a detailed account of the Ahmedabad textile strike, Gandhi's involvement and the establishment of the TLA, see Kamath and Kher (1993), particularly Chapter 4.

6 *Dalit* is a Marathi word for untouchables; originally used by the followers of Dr Ambedkar but now one of the most common terms identifying untouchables. Gandhi called the untouchable castes, *harijans*.

7 For a more detailed account of the tensions and split between the TLA and SEWA, see Rose 1992: 74–80; Abbott 1997: 201–3.

8 This is partly due to the organizing SEWA undertook as part of their disaster management strategy in the aftermath of the 2001 Gujarat earthquake (Vaux and Lund 2003).

9 Calculated at 2004 prices, US$1 = Rs.45.

10 The NCL is a peak body for informal workers and their organizations. Members include construction workers' unions, contract workers and domestic workers' unions, agricultural labourers and forest workers' unions. SEWA is the largest member of the NCL and the only union representing women workers.

11 There is a growing body of literature on the need to implement strategies of geographical unionism amongst contingent and informal workers. (See Sanyal 1991; Wial 1993; Carre *et al.* 1995: 33; Weaver 1997.)

12 Interview with Renana Jhabvala, July 1997, New Delhi.

13 Also personal correspondence Renana Jhabvala.

14 Interview with Manali Shah, SEWA union coordinator, January 1998.

15 '[Satyagraha] is the vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self' (Fischer 1997: 103). It is a strategy developed by the Indian community in Natal, South Africa. In August 1906, the South African government proposed an ordinance that would require all Indian citizens over the age of eight to be registered and fingerprinted by the government. They would be required to carry a certificate of registration at all times and present it on request or risk imprisonment. The Indian community and Gandhi were incensed and at the risk of jail initiated a campaign of public disobedience that came to be known as *satyagraha*.

16 See Gidwani (1989), Kishwar (1986) and Patel (2001) for detailed discussion on Gandhi's views on women, their public role in politics and society and how these views relate to the central Gandhian ideas of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. While SEWA draws on Gandhi's views of women as leaders with important public and social roles, a critical appreciation of Gandhi's 'feminism' shows he essentializes women as non-

violent nurturers who are selfless, simple and humble servants of all humanity, with a developed sense of duty and cooperation. He counts women as the stronger sex, arguing in his work *All Men Are Brothers* that women are the nobler sex, because they are 'the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge' (1995: 206). Gandhi reifies the 'feminine' as superior but in doing so maintains a traditional sexual division of labour.

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9 Korea

Women, labour activism and autonomous organizing

Kyoung-Hee Moon and Kaye Broadbent[1]

For many Koreans, 1999 is significant because it was the year when Korea successfully recovered from the economic difficulties brought about by the 1997 financial crisis. 1999 was also the year that three women-only unions formed in Korea. These phenomena are linked, as women suffered disproportionately during the economic crisis and because the union movement did not actively support women workers in their campaigns against discriminatory treatment. The first part of this chapter analyses the gendered dimensions of the post 1997 period of restructuring through a discussion of cases involving commercial banks and the Hyundai Motor Company (HMC). Both cases highlight the gendered nature of the employment restructuring programme; the disproportionate negative impact on women workers which was supported by mainstream enterprise-based unions. The cases diverge when we analyse the reactions of the women workers to their situation. While women bank workers accepted the job changes with little resistance, HMC's women canteen workers organized themselves and successfully opposed both the management and the male union leadership. We argue that they succeeded primarily because they fought, but another contributing factor to their success was the support they received from a women-only union when their own union abandoned them.

The second section of this chapter analyses two of Korea's three women-only unions, which provided some support for both the HMC cafeteria workers and the retrenched bank workers. These are the Seoul Women's Trade Union (SWTU), Korea's first women-only union, and the Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU), the largest of the three.[2] The SWTU and the KWTU organize women workers excluded by mixed enterprise-based unions, including those employed in non–full-time jobs and those defined by the recent industrial relations 'reforms' as 'independent' workers (contractors). The SWTU has also campaigned to organize unemployed women workers, which resulted in its legal recognition being delayed until February 2004. In this chapter, we examine the activities and roles of these women-only unions and their impact on women and the broader labour movement. We argue that they have achieved significant outcomes for women workers, individually and collectively, and for the broader union movement, as well as raising awareness about the employment conditions and rights of women workers in contemporary Korea.

Milkman (1985: 310) argues that in the USA women-only unions are 'challeng[ing] the established traditions of the labor movement while also working to expand the space of women within it' in order to fill the 'representation gap' which has emerged for women and other non–full-time workers who are excluded from enterprise-based unions. This chapter echoes those sentiments, arguing that in Korea it has been necessary to create autonomous women-only unions because of the structural dominance of Korean enterprise-based unions in large companies, which exclude all but full-time workers, and because of Korean union culture, which discriminates against workers (many of them women) who are not employed full-time. By exploring the role of women-only unions in cases like that of the HMC cafeteria workers, we demonstrate that in Korea women workers and women-only unions are not 'passive recipients of unionizing strategies [but are] women creating unionization' (Murray 2000: 13). In doing so, we further dispel the notion in the literature on women and unions – and in the minds of some male unionists – that women workers are passive, docile and not interested in industrial issues and union activity.

Women in mainstream unions

There is limited research in English which documents the union activism of women in colonial Korea (1910–45), but it is clear that women workers both organized themselves and were organized into mixed unions, during that period.[3] Women workers in Korea in the 1920s and 1930s formed unions and called strikes. Kang Ju-ryông, a well-known union activist, led the workers at the P'yôngwon Rubber Factory on a hunger strike in protest over low wages. She joined the P'yôngyang Red Labour Union where she assisted in organizing women employed in other rubber factories and provided leadership in industrial disputes (Barraclough 2006).[4] In 1923, women from Korea's first women-only union at Kyongsong Rubber Factory in Seoul went on strike demanding the dismissal of an overseer for mistreatment of women factory workers (Barraclough 2006). *Kunuhoe*, affiliated with the illegal communist party, organized a diverse group of women, including women workers, through the 1920s until it was disbanded in 1931 (Kim 1997: 97).

In contemporary Korea, women are significant in all sectors of employment, accounting for slightly less than 50 per cent of agricultural workers, around 25 per cent of manufacturing workers and a large proportion of service workers (Korean Ministry of Labour 2003: 112).[5] They are overwhelmingly predominant as unpaid family workers (89 per cent), temporary employees (55.8 per cent) and daily workers (48.6 per cent) – figures which have remained consistent since 1996 (Korean Ministry of Labour 2003: 118). Female union density is, however, low. In 1975, just 15.8 per cent of the total female workforce were unionized. This rose to 18.6 per cent in 1989 but declined significantly to 11.2 per cent in 1997 (Kang 2001: 347) falling to 7.4 per cent in 2001 (Korean Ministry of Labour 2003: 154).[6] Women have little power in mainstream unions even where they are well represented. For example in 1989, women accounted for 43 per

cent of the National Congress of Trade Unions (forerunner to KCTU), but although several women occupied high-ranking positions, the organization was primarily run by male leaders (Koo 2001: 182). In 1999, 30 per cent of the members of the Federation of Korean Trade Union (FKTU), the largest peak labour organization, were female, but only 30 of its 700 leaders were women (Seok 1999).

One major reason for the drastic decline in female union density in the 1990s was the large-scale impact of the economy's structural transformation from female-concentrated manufacturing to capital and technology-based industries following 'the Great Workers Struggles' in 1987. Overseas relocation of production, downsizing of the workforce and expansion of subcontractors or outsourced firms significantly reduced the women workers' industrial bargaining power (Kang 2001: 347–8). In addition, most of the student activists working with and supporting women workers in the manufacturing industries left the factories after the 1987 Democratization Movement, leaving women workers to struggle without the help of their student allies (Koo 2001: 180). However, another major reason for the decline in women's engagement with the union movement was change within the union movement itself.

While women unionists and activists made significant contributions both to the improvement of women's working conditions and to the Korean labour movement in the 1970s and 1980s, their importance decreased after the success of the 1987 Democratization Movement. In the 1970s, the majority of women union activists were employed in the garment, textile and electronics industries. Women activists pursued one of two strategies: to create new independent unions or to gain control of and transform existing company unions (Koo 2001: 72–3). These enterprise-level unions, including female-dominated unions, largely led the union movement until the late 1980s. However, from the early 1990s, these individual enterprise unions affiliated with the two national trade union organizations, the FKTU and the KCTU. The concomitant growth in male-dominated industries such as cars and shipbuilding meant that male workers began to account for the majority of union members. Men also continued to dominate the union leadership. As a result, an asymmetric power balance between male and female members developed inside the union movement.

For instance, the KCTU does have a Department of Gender Equality under its central organization but not in all of its regional branches. In addition, Kang (2001: 364–7) observes that in some of the KCTU's regional branches gender equality departments were headed by male leaders. Considering a very low level of women's representation in high-ranked positions in the KCTU, Kang (2001: 347) argues that it is necessary to have an independent department of gender equality in both central and regional union offices to protect women from employment discrimination.

The situation for women unionists worsened further when the Korean economy was hit by the 1997 crisis and nearly went bankrupt, only surviving with loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Driven by demands to increase the flexibility of the workforce, the Korean government legalized 'restructuring dismissals', which permitted lay-offs for the purpose of rescuing the company from insolvency in February 1998. The implementation of these laws had an immediate impact on the labour market, leading to a significant rise in unemployment and decline in the size of the full-time workforce as a result of a round of large-scale corporate restructuring under which many full-time workers were dismissed, to be replaced by more 'flexible' non–full-time workers and 'independent' contractors. The percentage of workers with full-time employment status among the total workforce dropped from 42.2 per cent for males and 23.1 for females in 1997 to 38.3 and 18.7 per cent, respectively, in 1999 (National Statistical Office of Korea 1981–2002). By 2002, women comprised slightly less than 9.5 million workers or approximately 41 per cent of Korea's total paid workforce (Korean Ministry of Labour 2003: 109).

Restructuring was carried out without any regard for equal employment policies to prevent discriminatory employment practices against marginal labour, specifically women. Both employers and unions favoured male workers through gender discriminatory practices, and in many cases working women were not only the first targets for dismissal but suffered greater difficulty in re-entering the labour market. Research conducted by the Korean Labour Institute (KLI) has shown that 'when there are increases in employment, women are employed as temporary workers but when [women are] dismissed, it was usually from full-time work, clear evidence that the restructuring carried out in 1998 was targeted at women workers' (cited in Park 2003: 39). The most common ways women could position themselves to remain in employment were by submitting to wage cuts or agreeing to have their jobs converted into non–full-time status. As a result, a larger number of women than men lost their jobs, and women's representation in the non–full-time workforce increased dramatically. The operation of gender-based discrimination in restructuring the workforce determined the experiences of women workers both in the commercial banking industry and at HMC. What is evident in these and other cases is that management successfully used gender to divide the workforce and diminish workplace solidarity and mixed unions were instrumental in the gendered nature of the restructuring programme. As shown below, these gender-discriminatory practices contributed to the significant growth of membership in women-only unions.

Women and unions in the commercial bank sector

As a result of the crisis, substantial restructuring occurred in Korean financial institutions, primarily through business closures, mergers or lay-offs conducted under the guise of government-led financial market reform (Crotty and Lee 2001). Restructuring of the banks during the post-1997 crisis period was followed by massive lay-offs and unemployment in the industry. The rigorous redundancy-oriented dismissal programme cut approximately 34 per cent of the banking sector's full-time workforce in the years 1998–9 (KFFLU 2000; Lee 2002: 149). In terms of gender differences, the job losses for women employed

full-time was 49.1 per cent compared with 27.6 per cent for men during the same time period.

In addition to the lay-offs, banks adopted a new human resource management strategy that aimed to re-establish a professional layer of workers capable of competing in the global financial market. They selected a small number of employees, mostly male workers, to take charge of core tasks, such as dealing with foreign or domestic investors. Meanwhile, peripheral tasks, including teller and customer services, were largely given to a non–full-time workforce, including part-time temporary contracted workers, or were outsourced (Kwun 1999, 2001). To achieve this shift, banks required large numbers of tellers, mostly women, to resign. The banks targeted a number of people for redundancy, informing the workers that they would be forcefully removed from the workplace if they resisted. They then re-hired those workers in the same jobs as newly recruited non–full-time workers, which meant they received around 70 per cent or less of their previous income (Kim 1999; Cho 2000a).

In order to achieve their aims, Korean banks introduced a voluntary retirement system, also called 'early honourable retirement', designed to reduce possible problems caused by the forced lay-offs. In order to persuade the workers to leave with relatively little resistance, each bank provided an early retirement compensation package, which included more retirement pay than usual and access to early pension benefits. Workers who had been targeted and those who felt their future job stability to be under threat comprised the greatest proportion who accepted the compensation package (Kim 1999; Kwun 2001). Consequently, 92.9 per cent of the total number of unemployed bank workers in 1998 appeared to leave their jobs voluntarily (KFFLU 2000). In most cases, men close to retirement age or those working in high-ranking positions were first to be targeted because of their relatively high income. The story for women, rarely employed in high-level positions, was somewhat different.[7] The banks applied explicitly gendered criteria to reduce the number of women workers. One of the reasons for retrenchment was the presence of another income earner in the household. Marriage and pregnancy were also used as criteria for dismissal in some banks.

In order to see how male and female bank union members responded to the employment restructuring programme, separate in-depth interviews with a male and female bank worker were conducted in 2001. Both workers interviewed were members of each of their banks' union during the post-1997 period of workforce restructure. The male worker was the chair of his bank's union at this time. When asked if the union in their workplace had played an effective role in protecting the members' from redundancy, both interviewees observed that union officials had no choice but to accept management's proposal. They commented that managers in the banking industry were under pressure from both domestic and international reformers such as the World Bank. Under these conditions, union leaders had made an effort to minimize the number of workers to be laid off and had also negotiated for higher levels of severance pay than were originally proposed.

Both interviewees also noted that union activities were not gender-neutral. The female interviewee, in her late twenties, commented:

> The majority of union members in my workplace were men and I was one of only a few female members. The union was open only to workers employed on a full-time permanent contract. When the workforce restructure was occurring in my workplace, the women workers including me found that some of the bank's criteria for dismissal were gender-biased and that they disadvantaged women particularly. We spoke to the union leadership about this obvious inequity but they responded by repeatedly emphasizing that male workers should be given priority in employment because they are the main family income earners. They urged us [women workers] to give up further discussion on this matter.
>
> (Interview Moon October–November 2001)

The gender-biased attitudes of bank union leaders in the period of post-1997 restructuring were confirmed in an interview with the male union leader. In response to the question of whether gender mattered in his bank's workforce restructuring programme, he said:

> In designing the bank's dismissal programme, the executive committee of the union was comprised entirely of men. They agreed that male workers, especially the ones with young children in school, must be protected from dismissal. The idea of protecting men from dismissal as much as possible was also supported by the committee members who were keen to reach a consensus on the programme with other union members, the majority of whom were men. After recommending the maximum number of women workers to be sacked, we made it a precondition for union acceptance of the dismissal programme that male workers must account for no more than 30 per cent of those workers would be retrenched. We then tailored the criteria for dismissal to that precondition.
>
> (Interview Moon October–November 2001)

His answer reveals that the male union leaders and members in his bank effectively used gender to protect themselves from unemployment. The following observation shows how the union set about reducing women workers' resistance. When asked how women union members responded to the union's proposal, he commented that:

> When the programme was first announced, women workers who met the criteria complained to us of gender bias. We (the union committee) sought to deflect women union members' resistance by talking to them individually. We explained to each of them that the union's decision was both inevitable and right to favour male workers and emphasized the family responsibilities and future career prospects of male workers. We

> emphasized the point that a larger amount of severance pay, compared to usual would be offered to those who left the workplace without resistance. We also emphasized that those who refused the 'voluntary' retirement package would be forcefully removed and would not be eligible for the larger compensation package. Faced with a poor alternative most of the women workers we [the union leadership] approached *chose* to accept the voluntary retirement package (our emphasis).
>
> (Interview Moon October–November 2001)

This provides critical evidence that women workers were explicitly targeted for dismissal and were persuaded to accept without resisting the gendered workforce restructuring programme. The above excerpts confirm that the 'male as breadwinner, wife as dependant' construction of the roles of women and men figured significantly in the process of workforce restructuring, a construction supported by both employers and union leaders.

Faced with a union movement hostile to gender equality, women bank workers took their fight against gender discrimination in workforce restructuring programmes through the court system. Some cases involved firms which had forcibly dismissed married women whose husbands worked in the same workplace (*Working Voice* 2003). Management threatened that their husbands' careers would be disadvantaged unless the women left the workplace voluntarily. Some of these women workers took their case to court asking for their forced retirement to be revoked. One important example is that of *Nonghyeop*, a commercial bank affiliated to the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation. During *Nonghyeop*'s process of workforce restructuring in January 1999, married women with husbands working in the same bank were forced to resign. The women workers were told that their husbands would be suspended from work by force unless the women retired voluntarily. As a result, 752 people out of a total of 762 married couples working in the same bank were sacked, and 688 of those sacked (91 per cent) were women. Some of these women were rehired soon after and performed the same jobs as they had done previously on a fixed-term contract. This case was later recognized as an instance of a gender discriminatory dismissal practice by the bank. While the case later went to court as an unfair labour practice contravening the equal employment law protecting gender equality in workplaces, the court decided in favour of the employers (Cho 2000a: 138; Shin 2002: 48; *Working Voice* 2003). The court's decision rested on the view that *Nonghyeop* reduced its workforce during the post-1997 recession for urgent managerial reasons. According to its finding, the bank had made every effort to reduce the workforce by offering 'early honourable retirement' and 'forceful job rotation' and that women workers *voluntarily chose* (our emphasis) the 'early honourable retirement' deal (Oh 2003). Notably, the legal challenge was conducted by women's organizations including domestic NGOs and two women-only unions, SWTU and KWTU.

Bop (*Rice*), Ggot (*Flower*) and Yang (*Scapegoat*): HMC women cafeteria workers

On the first day of December 1999, about two years after Korea's near plunge into national bankruptcy, one of the major daily English newspapers in the country ran a headline saying, 'Korea Set to Get Diploma for IMF Graduation' (*Korea Times* 1 December 1999). According to the story, the government had graduated 'early' from the IMF programme, as it had decided to receive no more IMF loans. A few days later, in the Ulsan plant of the HMC, 144 women cafeteria workers went on a hunger strike protesting against an agreement reached by HMC management and the male union leadership. Despite bitterly cold weather, the women workers insisted on staying in a tent they had erected outside the HMC production building. They had refused to eat for several days and would continue to do so until management and the union's male leadership agreed to them returning to their former positions.

One and a half years before this incident, HMC management informed the union that it planned to downsize its workforce, laying off 8,189 production workers, or approximately 18 per cent of employees, through voluntary retirement (Cheon 2006). Facing a decline in car sales and the strong demand of the government-led enterprise restructuring, HMC was the first *chaebeol* (conglomerate) to announce a large-scale lay-off plan after the crisis.[8] After management informed the union of its plan, the union proposed reductions in working hours and wages and rotating workers to take unpaid temporary leave as an alternative to forced dismissals.[9] However, management was insistent upon dismissing redundant workers, conducting the lay-offs in two rounds despite the union's efforts to negotiate to prevent the forced dismissals. When management announced the list of workers in the third round of lay-offs, the union announced it would call a general strike.

The strike lasted almost a month before the battle between management and the union came to an end through arbitration. Persuaded by the government, management agreed to reduce the number of workers to be laid off, and the union agreed to accept management's revised lay-off proposal to dismiss 277 workers in a third round of retrenchments.[10] Of those retrenched, 144 were women working in the company's cafeterias. The rest were male production workers.[11] The union's agreement to the proposal shocked the women cafeteria workers who had actively participated in the general strike. Not only had they been involved in the collective action, they had provided the striking workers with three meals every day. The average age of the women was 48 years, and on average they had worked in the cafeteria for 14 years. More than 70 per cent of them were the main income earners in their family.

The male workers returned to work after the agreement was signed, but the women workers remained on strike. They were striking not only against management but against the male-dominated union leadership's decision to sign the agreement. Facing the cafeteria workers' prolonged strike, HMC management and the union reached an agreement, whereby the cafeteria lease would be sub-

contracted to the union and run as a union business. Under this proposal the women workers were re-hired by the union as subcontracted workers. They returned to the same job but only received 60 per cent of their previous wage. As only half the former cafeteria workers were re-hired, the workload of those who did return increased significantly. The re-hired workers were promised full-time workers' rights and benefits depending on the company's future profitability. As a result, although the women workers were not in favour of the new working conditions, they returned to work with the hope of regaining their former positions in the future. One year later, these same cafeteria workers went on strike again. The company had fully recovered from its earlier economic difficulties but had refused to reinstate them, and the union had rejected their request to raise the matter for discussion in a union–management meeting (*Hankyoreh* 2003; Womenlink 2003). The women continued to fight strenuously against both the management and the union over 11 months from August 1999 to June 2000, when they finally achieved their goal.[12] While the HMC female workers were the primary actors in their 11-month struggle, there was also some support from outside actors including women-only unions. The women-only unions supported the HMC workers by organizing meetings with other women's organizations and releasing statements of solidarity for the HMC workers. Some of those statements were reported by the media, contributing to revelations of HMC's unfair labour practices, particularly against women, and focusing the public's attention on the HMC women workers' struggle.

Cho has argued that the female workers' struggles in HMC were the result of gendered responses of three male-dominated organizations – the government, the management and the union – to the process of neo-liberal economic restructuring (Cho 2000b). The state, which had encouraged firms to restructure their workforces by legislating for 'flexibility', viewed HMC's case as important because it could become a model of cooperative management–union employment adjustment. As a result, government officials worked hard to ensure both the management and the union reached an agreement, and little attention was paid to the implications for the workers concerned. Cho and others have criticized the motivations of management of HMC on the grounds that the employment dismissal plan was both economically and politically motivated. This criticism centres on the fact that the company appeared to have had few serious management problems during the crisis-affected period and in fact expanded into other sectors via a series of mergers and acquisitions. It is argued that management actually intended to dismantle the union's power and, at the same time, increase its negotiating power with the government over the state-led *chaebeol* reform (Cho 2000b; Lee 2002: 187).[13] In addition, ten years earlier HMC management had attempted to transfer the cafeteria's management to a subcontracted operation, but the transformation was unsuccessful because of union resistance, so HMC workers believed that management was using the recession to achieve its ten-year old aim of reducing union power in the guise of employment adjustment (Womenlink 2003).

Finally, the male union leadership could not avoid the criticism that they had

made the female workers scapegoats for the sake of other male workers' employment security (Cho 2000a: 300; Lee 2002: 190; LARNET 2003; Womenlink 2003). Dismissal of the women cafeteria workers was not consistent with the original reason that management offered for the workforce restructure, and the cafeteria workers were not originally included in the list of employees to be made redundant. The women cafeteria workers appeared as 'flowers' during the general strike because of their presence with male unionists and their provision of meals but later became scapegoats in the union–management negotiated settlement of the dispute (*Hankyoreh* 2002). Looking back over the three-year struggle, the leader of the HMC women workers' union, Choi Jong-Hee, said that the most difficult part of their struggle was the confrontation with male unionists who were friends with them one day but enemies the next (*Yeoseongsinmun* 2001). She claimed that some male unionists even openly criticized the female workers for being too selfish because they were not satisfied with their positions as subcontracted workers.

Like the case of the bank workers, the HMC case demonstrated a common theme of the post-1997 period, namely that mixed unions made little effort to protect women from the destructive impact of workforce restructuring which followed the crisis. The struggles of the HMC women cafeteria workers also showed the effectiveness of a women-only union in protecting women's employment in a male-dominated workplace. However, the HMC case is unique because not many women workers in Korea at that time adopted the strategy of autonomous organizing to fight to keep their employment – a stark contrast with the case of the Korean banks where women workers did not resist their union's acceptance of the gender discriminatory practices that characterized their company's workforce restructure.

Women-only unions

The failure of nationwide and enterprise-based mixed unions to protect women from the gender discriminatory programme of workplace restructuring during the post-1997 restructuring period brought new vigour to women-only unionism. After the crisis, women-only unions, which had flourished in the 1970s and 1980s in Korea, grew by sector, region and industry. Women-only unions organize predominantly on an individual basis and target workers who are not traditionally the focus of the enterprise-based mixed union movements, such as workers employed in non–full-time employment in the service sector and in non-unionized small enterprises. As well as focusing on non–full-time workers and enterprises employing fewer than five workers, women-only unions in Korea have been instrumental in organizing the growing number of so-called independent or self-employed contractors such as golf caddies and television script writers who, due to recent industrial relations legislation 'reforms', are excluded from legislative coverage as employees. These unions' main objectives are to secure equal employment rights, abolish gender-differentiated employment practices and perceptions and establish employment protection for working

mothers (KWTU 2003; KWWAU 2003). They have also supported women workers, including commercial sector bank workers, in their legal challenges to the gender discriminatory workforce restructuring programmes in post-1997 Korea.

The KWTU, the largest of Korea's women-only unions, is a nationwide union with nine regional branches. It organizes 5,000 women workers employed on a non–full-time basis as well as workers in non-unionized firms (interviews Broadbent October 2003, June 2004). The KWTU was created by members of the umbrella group the Korean Women Workers' Association United (KWWAU) and maintains a close affiliation with the association (KWWAU 2001). It organizes individual members and workplace branches in many industries and regions where workers are part-time, contract, subcontract or day workers. These workers are employed in occupations including nutritionists and cooks in schools[14] and universities, university cleaners, librarians, television screenwriters, hotel maids, golf caddies, clerical workers and women employed in small businesses (interview Broadbent October 2003). KWTU employs at least one full-time staff member in each of its nine regions and three in the Seoul branch. In recognition of the unstable nature of the work performed by the majority of its membership, the KWTU has developed a variety of methods to target potential members, including organizing public campaigns such as the Seeking Atypical Women Workers Rights campaign of 2000; provision of welfare programmes with KWWAU such as Equality line, a telephone counselling/advisory service; and distribution of leaflets and campaigning outside railway stations.[15] The KWTU is experiencing growth in membership and while still small is organizing the growing number of temporary workers in Korea.

The SWTU was established in January 1999 with 15 members but was only certified as a legal trade union by the Supreme Court of Korea in February 2004. Two of the original members were forced to retire from their jobs after marriage, and although they fought the decision, they received only severance pay. The husband of one of the women also lost his job at the company for protesting about the company's actions (Seok 1999; interview Broadbent October 2003). Other founding members had been employed by a non-government organization (NGO) Womenlink which dealt with women's issues. These members left Womenlink as they felt that the limitations of NGOs, which were unable to collectively bargain with employers, provided them with few avenues to assist women in improving their working conditions. The women believed this limitation prevented them from broadly and directly improving women's employment conditions. SWTU employs three full-time staff whose recruiting activities, until February 2004, were restricted by their status as an illegal union. Their recruiting has relied on distributing leaflets outside railway stations and media coverage, either about the union or about the picketing and other actions conducted with members.

Unlike other trade unions in Korea, the SWTU encourages unemployed women workers to join the union, in recognition of the instability of Korean

women's employment. This stance delayed its certification as a union because of a challenge by government officials (interviews Broadbent October 2004). However, the SWTU, like its sister unions in Japan, is small, and membership numbers are either stagnating or declining. In 2003, the SWTU had approximately 80 members, which they organized on an individual basis, from a range of industries and occupations including clerical workers, call centres and restaurants (interview Broadbent October 2003). Most of these workers are not covered by Korea's employment laws although officially under the Labour Standards Legislation all non–full-time workers have employment rights.

KWTU is the only women-only union in Korea with a direct affiliation to an outside body, namely KWWAU. The financial and organizational support provided by KWWAU ensures some stability for KWTU and may have achieved the balance between autonomy and integration with some of the structures of the union movement that Briskin (1999) identified in her study as important for women-only organizations to overcome marginalization. The main challenge for KWTU as it continues to expand is continuing to remain relevant to both its working class and its white-collar membership. The SWTU is in a more precarious position than KWTU, which because of its size and success is a source of competition to the SWTU. Both KWTU and SWTU are small in membership, comparatively speaking, but SWTU experiences problems with continuity of financial resources and organizational support.[16] Since its legal registration in 2004, SWTU has attempted to create a distinctive role for itself by conducting research into the needs of unemployed women workers. It is aiming to organize workshops and continue to lobby the national government, but KWTU has moved into this area also and has much greater influence.

Achievements

In Korea, women workers' grievances are largely the result of workplace restructuring and employers' desires for a more flexible workforce. Women-only unions benefit women by providing a collective voice and an accessible introduction to unionism for a workforce largely excluded and overlooked by mainstream unions. By creating autonomous women-only unions, women workers in Korea have not only created spaces for women separate from male workers, they have also attempted to create unions distant from the bureaucratic and hierarchical practices of many mixed unions, which Briskin (1999: 546) identifies as the motivation for the formation of the second wave of women-only unions (formed in the 1970s) in the USA and Canada. This approach differs from the service delivery model (Peetz *et al.* 2002: 86–7) of many mainstream mixed unions in Korea (and elsewhere) because of its focus on 'empowering workers ... [to] enable them to find solutions to their problems' (Peetz *et al.* 2002: 87).

KWTU, a legally recognized union, has been able to organize workplace branches and bargain with employers. KWTU has dealt with the grievances of cooks and nutritionists employed in universities and schools and librarians and laboratory assistants employed at schools around employers' demands for more

flexible workforces. It has supported several successful campaigns, including the case of cooks at a university which resembles the case of the HMC cafeteria workers. The university handed over management of the cafeteria to a labour hire company that sacked the cooks and re-hired them on a daily and casual basis. It later decided to run the cafeteria once again and like the labour hire company sacked the cooks employed at the time. In protest at the arbitrary treatment meted out by the university management, the cooks continued to show up for work. After 125 days, the striking cooks defeated the university, and they were reinstated as full-time employees (interview Broadbent October 2003). On the basis of this success, KWTU has organized cooks employed at other university cafeterias and school canteens.

KWTU has also organized golf caddies and television scriptwriters which have highlighted the employment insecurity faced by 'independent' contractors. However, the union still faces entrenched structural opposition. For example, when the KWTU negotiated a collective bargaining agreement for golf caddies for the first time in 2001, the manager of the golf club successfully appealed. In hearing the case in 2003, the Korean High Court reversed its earlier decision and now argued that as golf caddies were not 'legal' employees of the golf club but independent contractors, the club bore no employment responsibility for them and did not need to negotiate with them. On 15 October 2003, 110 golf caddies (five of whom were KWTU members) were dismissed from their employment. At 5 a.m. the following day, the caddies and union organizers held a rally at the golf course. Their struggle continues as the golf course manager remains steadfast in denying employment responsibility. Overall the KWTU because of its legal recognition, its presence in workplaces has had a greater impact on women workers' conditions.

SWTU's support in direct campaigns has raised the profile of women workers' grievances, but its illegal status (until 2004) restricted its ability to organize workers and to bargain with employers. This has forced SWTU to adopt strategies such as picketing and holding rallies outside workplaces, which draw attention to the campaign at hand. When women bank call centre workers launched a struggle for 'equal pay for work of equal value' in 1993 in the face of opposition from male colleagues, SWTU helped them achieve a successful outcome by lending its support to the campaign, forcing the banks to change their discriminatory wage system. However, in this case, the bank retaliated by appealing the decision and at the same time increased the number of part-time workers it employed (interview Broadbent October 2003).

Despite the size of its membership, SWTU has had a significant impact in addressing sexism and gender discrimination in civil society and social movements, including the union movement. The SWTU played a leading role in identifying and opposing gender discriminatory practices, including sexual harassment and unfair dismissals perpetuated within mixed trade unions. SWTU is at present representing two groups of women who are employed by unions: one case involves five workers who were unfairly dismissed and the second is a case of

sexual harassment perpetrated by the secretary general of the union employing the woman. Both cases have yet to be resolved (interview Broadbent October 2003, June 2004). The SWTU has also launched campaigns to protest the stereotyped depiction of women, and other forms of discrimination against women workers, by unions and social movement groups. Their complaint about a Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) poster depicting a woman as a 'mother' supporting a male 'worker' elicited an apology (Ee 2005). The SWTU also played a leading role in the *Hundred Women's Committee for the Elimination of Sexual Harassment within Movements* in 2000–3, which named prominent perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence within social movement groups. While there has been debate over the committee's tactics, interviews with female activists in the KCTU indicate the committee has had an impact in 'changing gender relations within labour groups'. Following the committee's actions in 2001, the KCTU enacted its own Code to Prevent Sexual Harassment (Ee 2005).

Impact on the broader union movement

Women-only unions have had an important impact on the broader union movement, particularly with regard to the right to organize. Of major significance to the broader union movement was SWTU's five-year legal battle to gain recognition which was challenged because it insisted on the right to organize unemployed workers. In February 2004, the Korean Supreme Court recognized SWTU's right – and therefore the right of all unions – to organize unemployed workers (interviews Broadbent October 2003, June 2004). For unions, this means that they can retain workers who have been sacked as members, an important concession given the impact on unemployment of the IMF reforms. Meanwhile, workers can retain union protection and benefits while unemployed.

So does this mean women-only unions could possibly rival mainstream mixed unions and divide the working class? This is unlikely in the foreseeable future as Korea's trade union legislation does not recognize multi-union workplaces. As a result, KWTU and SWTU, and in some cases the KCTU, are unable to organize in workplaces where a union already exists and to engage in collective bargaining with employers.[17] Both KWTU and SWTU are attempting to overcome this constraint by picketing and rallying at workplaces, which has been successful to some extent. The KWTU has concentrated on organizing allied occupations such as cooks and nutritionists to form regional occupational branches or large numbers of workers in a single workplace. Its support of school canteen workers and their successful strike means that KWTU has gained critical mass in some occupations/industries, which is contributing to its ability to expand.

More importantly, despite their focus on only organizing women, since 2000 the KWTU and SWTU have campaigned with the KCTU and the FKTU to change the labour legislation in order to provide security for 'independent' contract workers. KWTU organizes and campaigns with subcontract cleaners on university and school campuses who are employed on or below the minimum wage and, together with other unions such as SWTU, KCTU and FKTU, has

gained increases to the minimum wage from 8 per cent to 13 per cent annually from 2000 until 2005 (interviews Broadbent October 2003, June 2004; Nah 2005: 116). Both women-only unions have participated with the KCTU and the FKTU and other groups in 2000 to form the Council to Reform the Maternity Protection Act (interviews Broadbent October 2003, June 2004; Ee 2005). In response to the abolition of clauses in the Act which guaranteed the protection of women workers from working underground or on night shift and monthly paid menstrual leave, the SWTU and KCTU withdrew from the council. Their objections to the reform focused on what they saw as an emphasis on women working in large companies while reducing the working conditions of women employed in small companies and non–full-time workers (Ee 2005).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the gendered processes of the post-1997 employment adjustment were a major motive for women workers organizing by themselves in contemporary Korea. Following the crisis, the process of a gender-discriminatory workforce restructuring was effectively used to facilitate the interests of labour market actors, including the state, employers and male union leaders to the detriment of women. Restructuring was useful for employers in satisfying their need for a more flexible workforce on lower wages, and it was useful for the state to achieve the labour market restructuring relatively quickly and easily. It also offered an effective way for male union leaders to demonstrate to their male membership that they were instrumental in protecting them from unemployment.

The experiences of women workers at HMC and in the commercial banking sector highlight the gendered dimension of employment adjustment in post-1997 Korea. The struggle of the HMC women cafeteria workers also demonstrates the importance for women (and all workers) of collectively organizing to resist changes to their employment status and working conditions. The success of the HMC cafeteria workers demonstrates both the necessity of fighting back and the support the women-only union provided to fight management and male union leaders. In contrast, the women bank workers, by remaining isolated individuals, remained vulnerable in the face of 'persuasion' by male union leaders.

One of the strategies successfully used by the HMC cafeteria workers and others in response to this discrimination has been autonomous organizing. Recognizing the impact on women of the expansion in the non-regular female workforce, both the KWTU and the SWTU have focused on organizing women workers excluded by mainstream enterprise unions including workers employed on fixed-term or part-time contracts. The SWTU also fought to organize unemployed women workers recognizing that women workers employment paths are unstable and insecure. The focus of these women-only unions is not confined to advancing conditions for women alone. Women interviewed argued their efforts are aimed at improving conditions for a greater number of workers, female and

male. This is demonstrated by their participation in and support of actions, for example for part-timers, agency and temporary workers as well as joint actions on a wide range of campaigns. In Korea these joint campaigns also include action to raise the minimum wage. They believe the issues of interest to women workers had been ignored or sidelined by the male-dominated union movement.

In short, the significance of women-only unions in Korea lies not in the numbers of members they organize (which is small) nor their ability to conduct collective bargaining (which is limited). Their significance lies in the organizing of non–full-time workers, unemployed workers and workers not organized by existing enterprise-based mixed unions, the majority of whom are women. This focus indicates the potentially huge memberships that existing mixed unions in Korea are unable or unwilling to organize and increases the proportion of unionized workers. Women-only unions thus raise awareness of unions and the benefits of collective representation. They also politicize women workers by providing training and education, which has significant implications for the form and configuration of social and welfare policies. Finally, by co-operating with mixed unions on broader issues such as increasing minimum wages and improving conditions for part-time workers, women-only unions may also have a transformative effect on mixed unions, challenging them to rethink their strategies and create networks and connections beneficial for the broader workers' movement.

Declining union membership and strategies for union renewal are issues of debate for academics, union officials and union members world-wide (see IIRA 2000). A discussion of 'women organizing' broadens the scope and activity of the union movement, and an examination of women-only unions in Korea contributes to this debate. Women-only unions address the needs of a growing number of non-unionized women workers, and by unionizing these workers, they are extending collective representation. Their existence and successes challenges the cultures, policies and practices of male-dominated unions. A discussion of women-only unions in Korea also deepens our understanding of the institutions that contribute to debates on issues surrounding gender and unionism and the relevance of unionism to a growing sector of the workforce. The campaigns and court cases described in this chapter indicate that women-only unions are significant in situations where mainstream mixed unions are unwilling to address issues of importance to women. They also demonstrate that the women participating in Korea's women-only unions are not passive recipients of unionizing strategies but active agents unionizing by themselves to improve their employment conditions and their access to their labour rights.

Notes

1 Broadbent's research for this chapter and Chapter 10 were conducted with the assistance of an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship.
2 The discussion of the two unions is based on interviews conducted in Korea with officials of the SWTU and KWTU.
3 Novels such as *In'gan Munje* (*The Human Predicament*) by Kang Kyông-ae suggest

that women factory workers were active in industrial issues in pre-war Korea (Barraclough 2006). For more detailed discussion on women workers and unions in Korea, see Chun Soonok (2003) and Koo Hagen (2001).

4 The P'yongyang Red Labour Union was a revolutionary, underground union that was directly influenced by the Comintern. It had branches in a number of cities but as the Japanese colonial government cracked down on it, by 1933 many of its activists had been arrested (Barraclough 2006).

5 Women account for slightly less than 50 per cent of wholesale and retail workers and 69 per cent of the workforce in hotels and restaurants.

6 The rate of unionization of non–full-time workers is estimated at less than 2 per cent (interviews KWTU and SWTU June 2004).

7 In 1999, few women were represented in the higher levels, for example at level 1, there were no women; at level 2, only representing 0.4 per cent of workers; at level 3, increasing to 0.8 per cent and at level 4, representing 4.7 per cent of workers. The majority were concentrated in the lower levels. At level 5, women represented 39.8 per cent of workers, and at level 6, they represented 88 per cent of the workforce (KFFLU 2000). The majority of bank tellers were located in levels 5 and 6.

8 HMC, established in 1968 for automobile production, is the largest car company in Korea, belonging to the Hyundai Business Group. Based on the state's policy, 'Long-term Plan for the Development for the Car Industry', the Park military government assisted HMC's development of a mass produced motor car from the early 1970s (Kwon and O'Donnell 2001: 59). Under the condition of HMC's development of its own model, the government offered business incentives, for instance, by restricting foreign car imports and limiting other domestic motor car companies' emergence as assemblers. From 1978, however, HMC began its overseas market expansion, and it was 1983 when HMC first made its shipment of automobiles to a foreign country, Canada.

9 The HMC union, as well as other trade unions (i.e. Hyundai Heavy Industry) of the Hyundai Business Group, has been one of the most powerful enterprise unions in Korea since 1987, playing a role in leading Korea's militant-style labour movement (Koo 2001: 238–50).

10 The 277 workers targeted was a lower figure than the 8,189 workers management had originally proposed. However, through the two rounds of the forced restructuring process, 8,171 persons had resigned through voluntary retirement, and 1,916 persons had taken unpaid fixed-term job leave. Therefore, the total number of workers affected by the three rounds of workforce restructuring was nearly 2,000 workers greater than the number of workers originally planned (Lee 2002: 189).

11 Before HMC's workforce restructure in 1998, 382 women were working in the cafeteria. After the first and second rounds of restructuring through voluntary retirement, only 144 women were left in the workplace and all of them were targeted for the firms' planned round of forced dismissal (Cho 2000b: 304).

12 The story about these women worker's two-year struggle was made into a documentary called *Rice*, *Flower* and *Scapegoat* (Bop, Ggot and Yang) by the Labour Reporter's Network (LARNET). This film was submitted to the *Ulsan* Film Festival for Human Rights for screening in 2001. *Ulsan* is the city where HMC is located. However, the Festival organizers wanted to inspect the movie first before deciding whether to screen it. Apparently, there had been anonymous telephone calls questioning the validity of some of the film's scenes. It was later suspected that the telephone calls may have come from Hyundai Motor unionists. The film producer realized that the organizers intention to view the film prior to screening amounted to censorship which contravened freedom of expression. The producer requested the organizers withdraw the film. Due to the ongoing disagreement, LARNET refused to screen the film in the Festival and instead began showing it via a nationwide film tour (LARNET 2003).

13 The *chaebeols*' unhealthy business practices were blamed for Korea's economic problems. Following the IMF's strong call for the reform of the *chaebeols*, Kim Dae-Jung's government decided to lead the *chaebeol* reform by imposing five rules with a further three rules added later. However, the outcome of the reform appears unsuccessful due to the *chaebeols*' unwillingness to change, and as a result, the *chaebeols*' problematic structure remains virtually unchanged (Lee 2000, 2002).
14 Korean children eat lunch prepared at school.
15 I participated in one action outside a railway station in June 2004 where we distributed leaflets to passers-by, performed a play informing people of women's and temporary workers' employment rights and held a concert. In total, the action lasted several hours (Broadbent interview June 2004).
16 These are issues that Briskin (1999: 544) also identified as serious constraints in the continuation of autonomous women-only organizations in Anglophone countries.
17 At the time of the interview with Maria Chol Soon Rhie (Chairperson of KWTU) (June 2004), she indicated that the long-awaited amendment to the legislation, whose introduction has been postponed several times, would be introduced in 2007.

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10 Japan

Women workers and autonomous organizing

Kaye Broadbent

In 1990, a group of women workers in Osaka, Japan, formed *Onna Rōdō Kumiai Kansai* (henceforth *Onna Kumiai*), a women-only union. By 2003, 12 women-only unions had formed throughout Japan with the largest, *Josei Union Tokyo* (henceforth *Josei Union*) which formed in 1995, with 250 members (*Josei Union* 2003a). The formation of these unions signifies the re-emergence of autonomous organizing, a strategy women workers in a range of Anglophone and Asian countries used as early as the 1880s as a means of addressing issues such as gender discriminatory workplace practices including workplace violence, unequal pay, night work and patriarchal and paternalistic management practices. Women union activists regularly report a lack of understanding and support from male union officials towards issues affecting women (and ultimately all workers) (see Elton 1997: 111; Mody 2005). This may have contributed to the growing interest in women-only unions in some Asian countries where women workers/activists have concluded that women need to create and control their own unions to address issues that male-dominated, 'traditional' unions are ignoring or overlooking such as the sexual division of labour (Hensman 1996), discriminatory employment conditions, sexual harassment and sexual violence in the workplace (Parveen and Ali 1996: 142 fn 9). As was the case with women's departments in Japan's early unions, the formation of women-only unions in Japan evolved out of frustration with male union leaders' lack of understanding of the issues confronting women workers such as the poor treatment and employment conditions of temporary workers.

Unions in Japan were legalized in 1947. By 1950, more than 50 per cent of women in paid work were unionized. However, they were generally absorbed into unions previously organized by men. Mixed unions supported women workers' campaigns (Macnaughton 2005: 40–3) and demands for equal pay provisions and opposed forcing women to retire on marriage or when pregnant, but union policies emphasized women workers as wives and mothers through their support of expanded protective legislation (Simpson 1985: 223). There were also many struggles waged by women workers and workers in non–full-time work, which mixed unions have overlooked or been unable to address (see Simpson 1985: 220; Kawanishi 1992; Price 1997; Broadbent 2003). Like Korea, Japan's union movement is dominated by enterprise-based unions organized

within one workplace or company and automatically includes as a member any worker employed in the company on a full-time basis. As a result, non–full-time workers, subcontract and outsourced workers are rarely included in the enterprise union (Broadbent 2003). In contrast to the majority of mainstream, mixed enterprise-based unions in Japan, women-only unions resemble general unions as all women workers are eligible for membership irrespective of their employment status.

Of the 12 women-only unions in Japan, this chapter concentrates on two – *Onna Kumiai* (the first to form) and *Josei Union* (the largest) – in order to understand the impact of women-only unions in contemporary Japan. As Japan's women-only unions are a new area of research, there is little literature available in either Japanese or English, so original fieldwork underpins the research of this chapter. This analysis draws on interviews conducted between August 2002 and June 2004 with officials and members of two unions in Japan: *Onna Kumiai* and *Josei Union*, on my observations at bargaining sessions and union meetings with *Josei Union* and on Japanese language materials, including union documents. This chapter focuses on two important questions: are women-only unions in Japan viable and can they achieve stability and critical mass of membership and resources and have they been effective in mobilizing women workers and overcoming barriers to united action between female and male workers? It argues that while women-only unions are not growing, their co-operation and engagement with elements of the broader labour movement indicates they are clearly committed to the notion that united action between female and male workers is necessary to overcome further exploitation of the working class.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of women workers' position in Japan's labour market, while the second examines the role of women in mixed unions. The third section describes Japan's 'first wave' (1950s–70s) of women-only unions, and the final section analyses the development of contemporary women-only unions, focusing particularly on the 'second wave' (1990s) of which *Onna Kumiai* and *Josei Union* are a part. In examining these two women-only unions, I concentrate on analysing their viability to organize a critical mass of women workers and their impact on women workers and the broader union movement. This chapter concludes that women-only unions are important as they organize and represent workers excluded by the mixed mainstream unions. They are also significant because their co-operation with elements of the broader mixed union movement may have the potential to transform mixed unions by challenging them to rethink their organizing strategies and address the decline in Japan's union membership.

Women in the labour market

The significance of the development of women-only unions is highlighted when we examine the structure of the labour market for women in paid work, including the sectors and industries and the size of the businesses where women are

employed and their employment status. These factors impact on women's exposure to unions and thus their ability to remedy gender discrimination. Since the early 1960s, women workers have represented approximately 40 per cent of Japan's paid workforce (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2003: Appendix 7), yet they have faced gender discrimination at the hands of both governments and employers. In the 1950s, employers restructured the focus of Japan's employment system, emphasizing 'lifetime' employment. The 'lifetime' employment system, which only applied to full-time male workers in large companies, rewards employees who remain employed with the one company. At this time, a 'gender-specific escape route' (Kumazawa 1996: 167) was created where women workers were removed from jobs which placed them in direct competition with male workers. This was achieved by creating separate employment paths which resulted in women workers being moved into low-status roles and insecure employment. The impact of this persists to the present with women overwhelmingly represented in part-time work (Kumazawa 1996; Price 1997; Broadbent 2003; Arita 2005).

As in many countries, service sector industries have contributed to the expansion of employment opportunities for women. For women in Japan, the growth of employment in the service sector has paralleled the development of the service sector in the economy since the mid-1960s (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: Appendices 22–3). In 2002, 54 per cent of women workers were employed in service industries with only 24 per cent employed in manufacturing (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: Appendices 24–5). Women's dominance in insecure employment such as part-time work means they are very often ineligible for membership in their workplace enterprise union. Women workers also suffer gender wage discrimination which reinforces their lower status further despite 'equal pay for equal work' being enshrined in the postwar constitution. On average, women workers earn 60 per cent of a male wage and when part-time workers are included the gender wage gap increases (Brinton 2001: 16).

Women workers are employed in large numbers in small businesses with 42 per cent of women working in companies employing less than 29 employees (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2003: Appendix 76). The size of an enterprise's workforce is important as smaller companies are unable to compete with large companies which can offer higher wages and better conditions. As discussed, women are also overrepresented in the non–full-time workforce. According to the 2002 Labour Force Survey (Rōdōryoku Chōsa), women comprised 69 per cent of part-time workers working less than 35 hours per week (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: 56).[1] These figures suggest that compared with their male counterparts working women in Japan face discriminatory employment practices which include separate career paths, a significant wage gap and overrepresentation in non–full-time work.

In 2002, women comprised 40.8 per cent of the total working population or 27.3 million employees. Although the proportion of women employed in the paid workforce has remained steady since 1965, the age composition of women workers and the industries they are employed in have changed. The peaks and troughs of women's workforce engagement over their life cycle are referred to

in Japan as 'the M curve', because when tracked they resemble the alphabetic letter M. Contributing to the development of the M shape is the decline in the number of young women workers in the 15–19 years age bracket. Since 1965, the number of young women in paid work has dropped from 33 per cent to 16.7 per cent in 2002 (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: Appendix 9). The first peak of the M curve represents the nearly 70 per cent of women in their twenties engaged in paid work, reflecting the trend for women of either postponing marriage or remaining in paid work after marriage. The first trough of the M curve is the result of women in their thirties withdrawing from the workforce after the birth of a child. Over time, however, this trough has become shallower as more women remain employed full-time in the workforce. In recent years, around 60 per cent of this age group is choosing to remain in paid work. This indicates the continuation of the recent trend from the 1990s, with women remaining in paid work after the birth of a child (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: 9). The second peak of the M curve is the result of approximately 70 per cent of women in their forties remaining/returning to paid work. In many cases, women returning to work after a break are more likely to be employed in non–full-time work, particularly on a part-time basis, having returned to paid work after their youngest child started school.

Women's participation in Japan's mixed unions

From the late 1800s, women workers in the USA, UK, Australia and Denmark attempted to overcome gender discrimination and exclusion from membership in the early craft (skill-specific) unions which limited membership to male skilled workers, by forming their own unions restricted to women workers or as Briskin (1999) describes it, autonomous organizing (see Lewenhak 1977; Foner 1979; Ellem 1989; Jacoby 1994; Nutter 2000). In contrast to these Anglophone countries, Japan's early mixed unions were organized by industry and included unskilled workers. This meant women workers were organized into and active in Japan's mixed unions from the early days of union formation beginning in the early 1900s.

When unions in Japan formed in the early twentieth century, they were illegal and remained so until the ratification of the Trade Union Law in 1947. But women workers had been active in industrial issues even before the formation of Japan's early union movement. The first recorded strike was by women textile mill workers in 1886 (Sievers 1983: 79; Simpson 1985: 204). The strike was conducted without the support of any official union, but it convinced workers in other workplaces of the successes to be gained from strike action. Since those early days, women in Japan have made valuable contributions to workplace struggles and have been significant actors in Japan's union movement (see Sievers 1983; Suzuki 1989; Tsurumi 1990; Turner 1995; Mackie 1997).

Women first had a formal role in the union movement when a women's bureau was created within Japan's first union, the *Yūaikai* (Friendship Association) in 1916 (Simpson 1985: 209). In 1919, the dissension within, and

subsequent split of, the *Yūaikai* into two factions slowed the development of the women's union movement, but it gained momentum in the early 1920s. The growth in unionizing unskilled workers in the 1920s brought women and their concerns once more into the mainstream union movements (Tsurumi 1990; Mackie 2003). Early in their involvement, women union activists worked to organize women's departments within their unions (see Simpson 1985), despite opposition from the male-dominated leadership. They did so in an attempt to concentrate and more effectively co-ordinate their campaigns to recruit and organize members and to focus their industrial action. Through the formation of women's departments within their unions – or separate organizing to use Briskin's (1999) terminology (see Chapter 1) – women union activists sought to turn issues facing women workers, such as inequitable wages and harassment by male workers and supervisors, into broader union issues.

The majority of women union activists at this time were politically active socialists. While they were committed to organizing women workers and the creation of a women's department, they reassured male unionists that they need not worry that women would create an independent union because there had been no precedent for this (Simpson 1985: 214). Further splits in 1925 and 1926 had little effect on women workers because so few were organized – at the time, only 0.8 per cent of women in the paid workforce were union members (Simpson 1985: 214). In 1927, as a result of opposition to the existence of a women's bureau and the place of 'women's issues' generally within the union movement, a separate women's organization, the *Fujin Dōmei* (Women's League) was formed.

The ideological splits in the union movement and the constant harassment of women union leaders also created difficulties for women attempting to establish a women workers movement within the union movement. From its early days until its forced dissolution in 1939 (see Gordon 1991: 320–4), Japan's union movement and the development of working class solidarity, especially those aligned with the illegal Japan Communist Party and Japan Socialist Party, suffered from employer aggression and growing state repression stemming from Japan's military build-up to the Fifteen Year War (1931–45). The impact of the repressive social and political environment hindered the organization of women workers and the resources unions provided for conducting industrial campaigns and recruitment.

Industry-based unionism expanded rapidly in the early postwar years but was pushed back in the late 1940s and early 1950s by an employer onslaught encouraged and supported by the Occupation forces (1945–52) and the Japanese cabinet (Kawanishi 1992; Price 1997). The resulting ascendance and dominance of enterprise-based unions since the 1950s has created divisions within the working class and reduced opportunities for broad working class mobilization. Occupied with factional struggles, splits and divisions between public and private sector unions, the union movement generally did not consider overcoming sexism in the union movement and in society more generally a priority. This tendency has continued into the present, as illustrated by contemporary statistics

detailing the representation of women as union executive committee members, which stood at 14.4 per cent in 2004 (Kosei Rōdōshō 2005a). The enterprise-based union dominance of Japan's union movement has had a further negative impact on women workers as these unions exclude non–full-time workers.

Union membership in Japan is declining which means it is consistent with the trend internationally. In 2005, union membership covered only 19.2 per cent of the paid workforce – the lowest figure since 1970 (Kosei Rōdōshō 2005a). In 2002, only 13.5 per cent of women workers were union members also representing a continuous annual decline from a high of 29.4 per cent since 1970. The low percentage of women unionists is linked to their employment in non-unionized workplaces, their predominance in the poorly organized service sector and their overrepresentation in non–full-time employment (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: Appendix 95). In 2005, the estimated unionization rate for part-time workers was at a little over 3 per cent (Kosei Rōdōshō 2005b). Despite this crisis, Japan's union movement has continued to focus primarily on full-time workers, the majority of whom are male and employed in large companies.

Early women-only unions, 1950s–70s

Japan's first three women-only unions formed in the postwar period. These were the Omi Kenshi silk mill workers union and the Yamago silk workers union, both formed in the mid-1950s, and the *Nihon Shintaku Ginkō* (a bank) women workers union formed in the early 1970s. All three appear to have dissolved within a few years of their formation. Despite the brevity of their existence, the early women-only unions achieved some successes. The following examples indicate they forced both management and union officials to incorporate their demands.

The first women-only union, the Omi Kenshi silk mill workers union, formed during one of the most well-known early postwar strikes. In 1954, the workers at the Omi Kenshi silk mill went on strike and stayed out for 106 days. The strike focused on issues of pay and conditions which were important to all workers. However, workers also fought management over its belief that its responsibility extended to acting as de facto parents for the women workers housed in the company dormitory.[2] The Omi Kenshi mill was unionized, but the union had close ties to management. In May 1954, 20 employees created an independent women-only union to challenge the paternalism and patriarchal management style of the company (Price 1997: 119). After two rounds of mediation management agreed to all the union's proposals (Kawanishi 1999: 179).

The Yamago silk workers union was created in 1957. The Yamago experience differs slightly from that of Omi Kenshi in that Yamago was not a unionized workplace. There is evidence that management was hostile to unionization, since in the previous year a worker had been sacked for agitating for the formation of a union. During the unionization drive in the workplace in 1957, male workers who had close ties to management attempted to take over and control union organizing meetings. When a union was eventually formed, two or

three union executives elected were men who had a close relationship with management. Many of the rank and file women workers were angered by the union's actions such as signing a 'no strike' clause, and in March 1957 a group of young women organized a second union, independent of management influence, which was composed of women workers only. After management was presented with a set of demands, the company retaliated by locking the women out of the dormitory. Management attempted to intimidate the women workers and break the union, but the union had strong support from the rank and file. The independent women-only union and the management-friendly union co-existed until 1960 when they amalgamated. In the four years it existed, the women-only union succeeded in forcing the management-friendly union to address some of the issues it raised (Price 1997: 148–9).

Almost 20 years later, the *Nihon Shintaku Ginkō* (a bank) women workers union formed in 1971. Women workers employed by the bank formed a women-only union in protest over the existing enterprise union's male-dominated leadership's agreement with management to introduce a 15-level qualification-based wage scale. Women workers were angered by this new qualification-based wage scale because all the women workers were ranked at the lowest level despite their many years of employment. Forty-six women workers formed a women-only union and went on strike for half a day (Kumazawa 1994: 280). They continued their actions and negotiations through the various levels of tribunals, and in 1976 an age-based career path was introduced which did not discriminate on the basis of gender (Kumazawa 1994: 281). The company circumvented the new career path by emphasizing in the promotion criteria that each candidate for promotion must possess managerial experience. While appearing to be non-discriminatory, this criterion constituted a form of indirect discrimination because women workers were often denied access to the managerial positions or jobs where it was possible to gain managerial experience (Kumazawa 1994: 281).

For women workers in postwar Japan, autonomous or gender-specific organizing provided the means to protest against excessive managerial control, unrepresentative union leaderships and discriminatory employment practices but did not become a widespread strategy. Until its re-emergence in the 1990s, autonomous organizing occurred in only a few workplaces. In the 1950s, the formation of 'second' unions in Japanese workplaces was encouraged by employers and supported by the state with the intention of purging communist and socialist activists from the union movement (see Moore 1983; Kawanishi 1992; Price 1997; Kawanishi 1999), but the formation of women-only unions in unionized workplaces was different because women workers formed women-only unions to provide women with the means to address their workplace demands such as overcoming the sexist practices of management and union officials.

From these early examples, we can see that the success of the strategy of autonomous organizing was mixed. Japan's early women-only unions had to combat sexism in the workplace and overcome the neglect of women's issues by

the existing mixed unions. The Omi Kenshi workers formed a 'second' women-only union, and Yamago workers initiated the formation of a union in their workplace which had previously not been unionized. They succeeded in defeating the male-dominated union leadership, which developed too close a relationship with management, and women union activists won positions (Price 1997: 119, 148–9). The *Nihon Shintaku Ginko* workers attempted to overcome the sexism created by employers (Kumazawa 1994: 280–1). The women-only unions succeeded in achieving their aims, but management circumvented the success of the women bank workers by continuing to pursue indirect discrimination policies. The following analysis focuses on the women-only unions of the 1990s and their impact on women workers and the broader union movement, demonstrating that while they continue to support and assist women workers, their success has also been mixed.

Contemporary women-only unions

Japan's women-only unions are small compared with India's Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA; see Chapter 8) and the Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) (see Chapter 9). *Onna Kumiai* and ten other women-only unions organize between 40 and 70 members each and are run entirely by volunteers (interview August 2002, October 2003). While still small, *Josei Union* is Japan's only women-only union which organizes more than this number. The aims of *Onna Kumiai* and *Josei Union* include supporting and improving the working conditions of union members, aiming for the abolition of sex discrimination and gaining women's industrial rights, working to gain equal pay for work of equal value, the advancement of the social status of women and establishing networks with women's struggles internationally (*Josei Union* 2003b). A stated future goal of the unions is to expand their membership and create a national and ultimately international, network (interviews August 2002).[3] In creating these networks, both women-only unions, while not affiliated with any peak national union organization, have established connections and have co-operated with *Rengō*'s (Japan Trade Union Confederation) Gender Equality Department. Internationally, *Josei Union* has co-operated in a case involving a sexual harassment claim against Mitsubishi in the USA (*Josei Union* 1999: 25) as well as participating in study groups and workshops organized by Korean women-only unions.

Both *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* are registered unions under Japan's Trade Union Law. However, they differ from enterprise-based unions, which dominate Japan's union movement. Enterprise-based union membership is generally restricted to full-time employees of a particular company, although enterprise-based unions are beginning to organize elements of the non-full-time workforce (see Broadbent 2003). Unlike enterprise-based unions, women-only unions do not use criteria to restrict membership in the union and so do not exclude non-full-time workers. *Onna Kumiai* and *Josei Union*, while different in size, are structurally similar as both are run by a committee which oversees the functioning of the union. This committee is supported by several smaller com-

mittees which are responsible for the publication of materials, the organization of fundraising or solidarity activities, recruitment and education/training.[4] The executive committee is elected by and from the membership and holds annual general meetings and monthly case study meetings which inform members of the progress in bargaining or grievances.

Initial discussions regarding the formation of *Onna Kumiai* were started in 1987 by former women workers at the Japan National Railway (JNR).[5] These women were disenchanted with their union's neglect in negotiations of retrenchment packages for long-serving casual and temporary workers. *Onna Kumiai*'s founding members were critical of the hierarchical structure of their union and questioned the validity of union leadership positions dominated by men (interviews October 2002). They described their despair at disputes occurring within the union and the general paucity of vision for moving the union movement forward. In their analysis, the union movement had 'lost its way' and that the male-dominated and 'organizational (bureaucratic)' nature of the union leadership was responsible (interviews November 2002, October 2003).[6]

Onna Kumiai evolved in its present form following a split within the organization. *Onna Kumiai* formed when the *Sexuality o Kangaeru Kai* (Group Concerned with Sexuality Issues) joined with a group of women workers frustrated with union bureaucracy and a male-dominated union hierarchy. The *Sexuality o Kangaeru Kai* split off soon after *Onna Kumiai* formed. As *Sexuality o Kangaeru Kai* also represented women survivors of male-perpetrated violence, they did not want to co-operate nor conduct campaigns with male workers. As a result of the difference in direction, a significant proportion of *Onna Kumiai*'s founding membership left (interview October 2003).

Josei Union was formed in 1995 by two women organizers in the women's department of the Japan's National General Workers Union (NGWU); a mixed, general union which, unlike enterprise-based unions, organizes workers across enterprise, occupation and employment status boundaries. Those involved in *Josei Union*'s formation chose to organize a women-only union, not because they wanted to avoid activism with male workers, but to overcome harassment from the male union leadership of the NGWU (interview October 2003).

Josei Union emphasizes that the union is 'by women, for women' (*Josei Union* 2002: 2). *Josei Union* is Japan's sole women-only union to conduct collective bargaining, and it does so in only a few cases.[7] While the majority of *Josei Union*'s cases are conducted on an individual basis, there have been a few instances where collective outcomes have been achieved from what initially appeared to be a case for individual bargaining. For example, *Josei Union* was approached by an employee because of underpayment in working time/paid holiday entitlements. As negotiations progressed, other employees began to question their entitlements, and the union was approached to broaden the claim (*Josei Union* 2003b; interviews October 2003, June 2004).

The union encourages women to actively participate in the resolution of their own issues – literally 'resolving your own issue by yourself' (*anata no mondai wa jibun de yatte moraimasu*). This has two positive outcomes. First, it encour-

ages women to take charge of their grievance and 'own' it, while in the process gaining valuable knowledge and skills regarding employment conditions, employment and labour law and grievance procedure remedies. The second outcome is more pragmatic as this strategy reduces the demands for organizers' time, for example, allowing them to concentrate on providing specialized advocacy skills. Negotiations are generally conducted by members with a union organizer, sometimes with other women-only union members present.[8] The issues most commonly dealt with in 2002 were unfair dismissal (88 cases), sexual harassment (86 cases) and bullying (86 cases) (*Josei Union* 2003a: 8). The union also noted an increase from 2001 to 2002 in cases regarding non-standard employment contracts (25 cases compared with 72 cases), sexual harassment (20 compared with 86 cases) and occupational illness (20 compared with 52 cases) (*Josei Union* 2003a: 8). The union attributes an increase in these types of cases to the more competitive economic environment forcing companies to restructure their workforces in order to cut costs. Employers are unfairly dismissing non–full-time employees and placing increasing pressure on employees to work harder and longer, in a country well known for long working hours, long hours of unpaid overtime and 'death from overwork' (*karōshi*) (interviews October 2003). The issue of sexual harassment also became a major policy focus particularly after the revision of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) in 1999.

Challenges

Japan's women-only unions face many challenges, including barriers to member recruitment. With so few members, there is a small pool from which to draw financial resources or activists and so Japan's women-only unions face issues of survival and growth – issues that have also been identified as a constraint on autonomous women-only organizations in research on Anglophone countries (Briskin 1999: 544) As *Onna Kumiai* is run by volunteers, its survival is dependent on the commitment of their volunteers and their ability to continue to attract a supply of volunteers in the future. The demands on *Josei Union*'s full-time organizers means there is little opportunity for recruiting new members or conducting recruitment campaigns. Instead the union is reliant upon media coverage and referrals from members (past and present).

Japan's women-only unions while recognized by the Trade Union Law are, however, restricted in their access to potential members by the rise in union preference and closed shop agreements.[9] In 2004, 64 per cent of workplaces were covered by a closed shop agreement where all full-time workers must become union members, an increase of 6 per cent since 1998 (Kosei Rōdōshō 2005c). It is generally the case that union membership in the enterprise-based union is compulsory for full-time workers upon employment, and as mentioned earlier membership in enterprise-based unions generally excludes non–full-time workers. The combination of an increase in closed shop agreements and the growth in the number of non–full-time workers, all but a few of whom are

excluded from union membership, means that a growing proportion of Japan's workforce is excluded from union membership unless they join as an individual without informing their employer.

On the surface, this represents a potential pool of members for unions such as *Josei Union*, but the growth in union preference agreements prevents other unions from organizing even the non-unionized workforce. Union preference agreements prevent the organization of more than one union in one workplace even though Japan's Trade Union Law permits the existence of multiple unions in a single company (Araki 2002: 162). Data from 2004 indicate that only 11 per cent of workplaces had more than one union, a decline of 3 per cent since 1999 (Kosei Rōdōshō 2005b). Union preference agreements make it difficult for unions such as *Josei Union* to gain access to non-unionized workers employed in a unionized workplace but who are excluded from the union. As a result, even if *Josei Union* had the organizers to recruit and organize non-union members in unionized workplaces, the existence of union preference agreements prevent it.

Josei Union draws 68 per cent of its membership from workers employed full-time (in non-unionized workplaces), 12 per cent are employed part-time and the remaining 20 per cent are a mixture of contract and agency workers (*Josei Union* 2002: 39). The generic services industries (including financial and personal services such as care workers) rank highly at 37 per cent of the membership, while manufacturing workers represent 22 per cent. As a feminized occupation, clerical work is predictably well represented with 48 per cent, while specialist and technical staff represent 22 per cent of *Josei Union*'s membership. The obstacles preventing *Josei Union*'s expansion of its membership hampers its ability to retain current members and to recruit new members and reduces its efficacy as an organization. The prospects for *Josei Union* achieving stability or critical mass are limited by the dominance of enterprise-based unions and the preference of employers for dealing with enterprise-based unions.

Declining union membership and strategies for union renewal are current issues of debate for academics, union officials and union members world-wide (see Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998; IIRA 2000; Fairbrother and Yates 2003), and women-only unions are attempting to address the needs of the growing number of non-unionized women workers. One possible solution not yet explored by Japan's women-only unions is to establish connections with 'second' unions or 'new-type' unions (Kawanishi 1992),[10] which organize workers beyond the enterprise. For Japan's women-only unions establishing a coalition with these alternative unions, which are generally more democratic and activist-focused than enterprise-based unions, would create a larger support network of resources for both the union officials and the union members. The existence of a more activist-focused, democratic union coalition would have the potential to revitalize the union movement.

Another alternative is to co-operate with working women's groups, which Hensman (1996: 202) identifies has been important in India, or to co-operate with a broader women's movement as the KWTU has done. The KWTU, as we have seen in Chapter 9, benefits from the organizational and financial support of

an umbrella organization of women's groups. Unlike the KWTU, Japan's women-only unions are not linked to a broader working women's movement which could provide access to a larger organizational and financial base. As a result, their prospects are unstable.

Successes

While the formation of women-only unions, or autonomous organizing, has been limited to a few instances in contemporary Japan, the strategy has achieved some measure of success in confronting discrimination against women workers. *Josei Union* has successfully secured financial settlements for members who have been unfairly dismissed. This is a positive outcome for the individual concerned, but the job market for middle-aged workers is tight. Older women, if formerly employed full-time, face the difficulty of re-entering the labour market, except perhaps as non–full-time workers on reduced conditions (see *Josei Union* 2003b: 11, 2003c: 11).

Onna Kumiai, despite its size, is supporting two members involved in campaigns which directly confront Japan's gendered employment practices. Both members have been involved in court actions for more than ten years, the average length for these types of court cases in Japan. One case is addressing unfair dismissal and non-payment of retrenchment pay for long-term, temporary workers, and the second is addressing gendered wage and promotion discrimination practices. Ms Yakabi Fumiko is alleging her company has a policy of wage and promotion discrimination against women. Throughout her case, which has continued for over ten years, Ms Yakabi has received little support from her company's enterprise-based union. The union is complicit in the company's sexist practices as union officials have testified against her and supported the agreements it had reached with management. Her allegations of discrimination in employment and promotion practices have been upheld by Osaka's district and high courts, but as her employer has challenged both decisions, she is awaiting the decision of the Supreme Court. In past cases such as the Sumitomo Electric company wage discrimination case which lasted ten years, the Osaka High Court in 2005 overturned an unfavourable District Court decision and recognized the company did discriminate against the women by refusing to promote them (The Group Leading a Major Victory over Sumitomo Metals Gender-based Wage Discrimination). Other similar cases include the Akita Sogo Bank Case (1975), the Ishizaki Honten case (1996), the Sumitomo Life Insurance Company (2002) and Sumitomo Electric Company (2003) which have had favourable outcomes for the plaintiffs (ILO website). As Ms Yakabi's campaign also addresses broad issues of discriminatory employment practices and wage discrimination, a victory for her would provide further precedent for judges overseeing similar cases and possibly provide encouragement for women facing employment discrimination.

As noted earlier, the focus of women-only unions in Japan is not confined to advancing conditions for women alone. The union officials and members interviewed argued their efforts were aimed at improving conditions for a greater

number of workers, both female and male. Their beliefs are demonstrated by their participation in and support for actions to increase benefits for agency and temporary workers. By co-operating with mixed enterprise-based unions on broader issues such as increasing minimum wages and improving conditions for part-time workers, women-only unions may have a transformative effect on mainstream unions and challenge them to rethink their strategies and create networks and connections beneficial for enhancing the broader workers' movement. *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* are involved in broad campaigns supporting equal treatment for part-time workers and benefits for temporary workers such as the *Kinto Taigu* (Equal treatment for temporary workers) action in 2003 (interview October 2003). *Onna Kumiai* participated in another action in October 2003 to address issues of equal rights for part-time workers which involved distributing leaflets, marching, holding speak outs and performing a skit at a series of nominated venues around the march route in Osaka.

Conclusion

The significance of the current women-only unions in Japan at present lies not in the numbers of members they organize, which is small, nor their ability to conduct collective bargaining, which is limited. Their yet to be realized potential significance lies in organizing non–full-time workers, unemployed workers and full-time workers not organized by existing enterprise-based mixed unions. The low rates of unionism for workers in non-unionized workplaces or non–full-time workers indicate a potentially huge membership that existing mixed enterprise unions in Japan are unable, due to management imposed restrictions, or unwilling to organize. Women-only unions could capitalize more on unionizing non–full-time workers. However, the obstacles to the formation of 'second' unions discussed earlier would stretch their financial and organizational resources.

Despite their limitations, women-only unions have had a significant impact on the lives of their members by addressing and resolving issues such as unfair dismissal, non-payment of wages and benefits, sexual harassment and violence. By increasing the number of unionized workers, women-only unions raise awareness of the conditions experienced by women workers through forms of organizing which encourage women workers to actively participate in the running of the union. More broadly, women-only unions raise awareness of unionization and the benefits of collective representation among women workers and extend the reach and understanding of unionism and working class politics. By organizing women workers into unions 'run by women and for women' and by providing training and education, women-only unions have succeeded in politicizing women workers.

Notes

1 As the government defines 'part-time' as working less than 35 hours per week, it needs to be remembered there are a growing number of part-time workers working

more than 35 hours per week, including women, who are still treated as 'part-time' at their workplace receiving the lower pay and benefits of part-time workers compared with those of full-time workers. For a discussion of the differences and the construction of part-time work in Japan, see Broadbent (2003).

2 All 22 of the union's demands are listed in Kawanishi (1999: 179–80).

3 The SWTU, *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* have established connections as the Japanese unions participated in a study tour to Korea in late 1999, and *Josei Union* participated in a workshop organized by KWTU in 2005.

4 *Onna Kumiai* and *Josei Union* run telephone counselling/advisory services, education and solidarity activities for activists, members and non-members, workshops and seminars and fundraising activities such as the celebration of seasonal events. *Josei Union* maintains a website and publishes a monthly newsletter to keep members informed of current issues, such as the impact of proposed legislative reforms on women and progress on current cases.

5 The JNR dispute in Japan has continued since the late 1980s when the Japanese government began privatizing and dividing the public railway system with the not so hidden agenda of busting the powerful *Kokurō* union.

6 Briskin's (1999) study reveals that women-only unions in Anglophone countries were conscious of developing an alternative to existing male-dominated bureaucratic unions.

7 One activity associated with 'traditional' unions is collective bargaining. In Japan, however, the introduction of the *Shuntō* (spring struggle) in the 1950s with its focus on centralized collective bargaining while important did not become central as a form of collective bargaining and enterprise bargaining was conducted. It is argued that bargaining gave way to joint consultation at shopfloor level (Kawanishi 1992: 112) or management refusing to negotiate (Price 1997: 134–5), resulting in future generations of union officials with little experience of bargaining. This inexperience raises questions about the bargaining strength of enterprise unions and the impact of enterprise bargaining on gender equity (Kumazawa 1994: 281).

8 I participated as an observer in both collective and individual bargaining sessions, and members commented on the feeling of solidarity and support gained from the participation of other union members.

9 Membership in more than one union is also not permitted in Japan (Araki 2002: 163).

10 Kawanishi (1992) uses the term 'new' type unions to refer to unions organized beyond the traditional industry, occupational or enterprise basis. These include unions organized in specific communities and part-time workers' unions.

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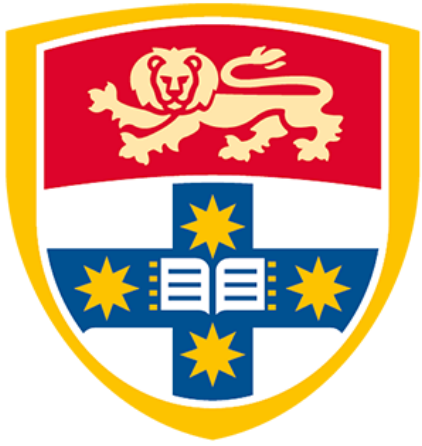

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